MA Major Research Paper

AUTHORITARIAN REVERSION: FROM COMPETITIVE TO CLOSED
AUTHORITARIANISM IN RUSSIA 1991 - 2004

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Introduction

Although much research has been conducted and a number of theories derived from the studies of the processes of democratization (Lipset 1959; Rustow 1970; O’Donnell and Schmitter [1986] 2013) and democratic breakdowns (Merkel 1981; Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan 1978; Diamond et al. 1997), the field of transitology has prevaricated from the processes of de-democratization or ‘autocratization.’ The reversal tendencies of transitional or hybrid regimes have been vaguely reviewed until recent scholarship started observing democratic declines of younger democracies, born out of the third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991). While these have been perceived as incomplete or transitional forms of democracy, a number of regimes in the former Soviet Union and Africa either remained hybrid or took an authoritarian course (Levitsky and Way 2002, 51). Thus, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way (2002, 51) propose to “stop thinking of these cases in terms of transitions to democracy and to begin thinking about the specific types of regimes they actually are.” The aim of this paper is thus to observe a rather novel phenomenon and contribute to the various assumptions concerning hybrid regime (competitive authoritarianism) governance and regime’s subsequent processes of autocratic reversion. Accordingly, the following theoretical exposition will be based on the following procedure of autocratic reversal:

\[ \text{Authoritarianism} \implies \text{Competitive Authoritarianism} \implies \text{Closed Authoritarianism} \]

Exploring the mechanisms and reasons behind autocratic relapse requires delving into the initial stages of democratization and those of democratic breakdown. However, when dealing with post-autocratic regimes, it is imperative to consider that in most of these cases, democracy was not fully consolidated and thus classic theories of democratic breakdown may not be fully applicable. Truly, the breakdown of established liberal democracies has been extremely rare (with the exception of
few cases in the first half of the 20th century) (Merkl 1981), while a number of young democracies have experienced a sharp decline in their democratic quality in the past two decades. Thus, in order to construct a viable theoretical framework for what appears to be a rare incidence in the mainstream literature on regime transitions, the working concepts of democracy, hybrid regimes, and full authoritarianism will be primarily defined. Henceafter, theories of regime change – democratization and democratic breakdown - will be presented in light of competing approaches to regime transitions. Applying actor-based approach, theories of autocratic endurance and reversion will then serve as an essential framework for further analysis of the mechanisms of authoritarian reversion in a post-communist state.

Finally, using 1990s Russia as a case study, I hope to demonstrate how weak institutionalization in a presidential system poses an increased risk of autocratic reversion in a non-consolidated democracy. More specifically, by analysing the period from 1993 (competitive authoritarian) to 2004 (closed authoritarian), I hope to expose the dynamics of ‘controlled’ democratization in the post-Soviet Russia - the mechanisms by which autocratic elites are able to establish, maintain, and securely transfer power. In this sense, the key sources of authoritarian durability – states and ruling parties (Way 2015, 9) - will be stressed to demonstrate the dynamics between an incumbent party and the opposition across timelines. The 2000-2004 timeline is of particular importance, as within these few years into the new millennium, the means of autocratic reversion are chiefly predicated on Putin’s new policies immediately following his presidential inauguration. Keeping in mind the unique trajectory of regime changes in post-communist and post-Soviet states, I predominantly turn to scholars attempting to explain failed democratization processes in the region (Levitsky and Way 2010; Way 2015). Hence, whilst employing their explanations of democratization processes in post-Soviet countries, I will expand on the notion of
(increasing) organizational power – state coercive capacity, party strength, and economic control (Way 2015) – to determine the mechanisms by which an authoritarian leader is able to not only consolidate his/her power and halt the democratization process but revert the country’s course toward closed authoritarianism. Hence, the Russian case provides a complex, yet appropriate, framework for the integration of various approaches and concepts within the literature on autocracies, as well as contending theories on democratization and democratic breakdown. By assimilating these into a feasible model of authoritarian reversion, this paper aims to contribute to a growing body of literature on de-democratization processes, which have become prevalent in the countries that attempted to establish various kinds of democracies in the post-Cold War period.

Part I. Regime Type

**Democracy.** It has become conventional for the scholars studying more in-depth processes of democratization and democratic breakdowns to use the *procedural* definition of democracy revolving around competitive elections. The “minimalist model” or procedural element in the definition of democracy was originally emphasized by Joseph A. Schumpeter ([1943] 2003, 269; 1950), who stressed the importance of stable and institutionalized electorally competitive political parties for democracy in large polities (Levitsky and Way 2010; Tilly 2007, 8; see Huntington 1991). Following Schumpeter, in Robert Dahl’s (1956; 1971; 1986) definition of democracy or “polyarchy,” a state must meet certain “criteria”: elected officials; free, fair, and frequent elections; freedom of speech and press (alternative sources of information); associational autonomy; inclusive citizenship (Schmitter and Karl 1991; Diamond 1999). Guillermo O’Donnell (1986) and Juan J. Linz with Alfred Stepan (1996) include the rule of law as an indispensable aspect of liberal and consolidated democracy. However, not all democracies born out of the third wave of democratization reached the aforementioned criteria. This, in turn, generated a vast interest among
comparativists to research ‘gray-zone politics’ (Carothers 2002) - loopholes in the processes of democratization, liberalization, and democratic consolidation - in countries that attempted to move away from dictatorships in different parts of the world. Generally, in these studies, democracy came to signify a system in which parties – with their divisions of interest, values, and opinions - lose elections, and the degree of incumbent advantage does not limit the opposition’s ability to compete (Przeworski 1991, 10; Levitsky and Way 2010, 6; Przeworski et al. 1999). The latter aspect is reinforced by the existence of a reasonably playing level field – access to resources, media, and the law - between incumbents and opposition (Levitsky and Way 2010, 6).

**Competitive Authoritarianism.** Since the 1970s, it became clear that regime transitions from authoritarianism could lead anywhere (Schedler 2002, 36; Sartori 1975). To Thomas Carothers (2002, 6), such diversity of political patterns within the gray zone was vastly overlooked by democracy promoters, who relied on ‘transition paradigm’, thus treating democratic transitions as ‘linear and incremental paths’ from authoritarianism to democracy (see Mohamedou and Sisk 2017). Scholars tend to differ in their conceptualizations of the countries stuck in transition. Many perceive these ambiguous regimes as “diminished subtypes” of democracy or “democracies with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997; see Diamond 1999; Dahl 1971; O’Donnell 1994; Zakaria 1997). Others avoid associating hybrids with the term democracy altogether and choose to assign adjectives to authoritarianism – electoral authoritarianism, semi-authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism - for a more accurate classification (Ottaway 2003; Schedler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010; Mainwaring 2012; see Linz 2000). These new forms of authoritarianism, as Larry Diamond (2002) and Andreas Schedler (2002) notice, are different from the old hybrids or multiparty, electoral nondemocratic regimes. Instead of simply banning their opponents, modern nondemocracies “corral them through different methods” (Brownlee 2009, 518). By the same
token, comparativists have demonstrated how elections are not merely restricted to democracies but fulfill many functions in these new authoritarian regimes (Lindberg 2009, 6; Gandhi 2008; 2014; Brownlee 2007; 2009). Elections may increase legitimacy of a non-democratic regime putting up a façade of democracy; split the opposition into factions; strengthen party organization and patronage structures; bring the opposition into the open for identification and targeting and buying time for a later exit (ibid.). Levitsky and Way’s concept of “competitive authoritarianism” captures this political dynamic of these post-Cold War regimes well. Here, excessive manipulation of state institutions and resources limits political competition and renders regimes as:

...civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. Such regimes are competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favour of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5-6).

Still, equating modern subtypes of autocracies has become an issue, mainly because of the (drastic) differences in their degrees and forms of competitiveness. To Diamond (2002, 26-9), the strength of the opposition’s challenge to an incumbent is what distinguishes competitive from electoral authoritarianism, which is perceived to be more hegemonic and transmit uncompetitive character (Schedler 2013). Similarly, Levitsky and Way (2010, 16) deem electoral authoritarianism and semi-authoritarianism as broad terms “[referring] to all authoritarian regimes with multiparty elections – both competitive and hegemonic.” By contrast, Matthijis Bogaards and Sebastian Elischer (2015, 10) differentiate between competitive and hegemonic authoritarianism based on the chances for success of the opposition: “Slim but not remote under competitive authoritarianism, negligible under hegemonic authoritarianism.” Relatedly, though, to Levitsky and Way (2010, 7) what marks the difference between competitive authoritarianism and full
autocracies, is the existence in the former of constitutional channels through which opposition
groups are able to compete for executive power in a meaningful way. Consequently, what matters
is not a mere existence of parliamentary opposition that are able to somehow challenge the
incumbent, but the mechanisms through which they act and are able to alter the outcome of
elections in a meaningful way. Inversely, by delving into the dynamics of electoral competition
between opposition parties and incumbents (Lindberg 2009; Rakner and van de Walle 2009;
Schedler 2009; Bunce and Wolchik 2009; see Mainwaring and Shugart 1997) and exploring the
mechanisms used to weaken the opposition (Levitsky and Way 2010; Way 2005; 2015; Brownlee
2007; Svolik 2012), it becomes possible to observe authoritarian reversion. The political dynamics
within competitive authoritarianism thus ought to be juxtaposed with those in full autocracies.

**Full (Closed) Authoritarianism.** Fully authoritarian regimes differ in their character and
ways of dealing with opposition. As Milan Svolik (2012, 39) put it, “A violent rather than
institutional resolution of conflicts is…an ever-present possibility in authoritarian politics.”
Levitsky and Way (2010) expand on the notion of non-competitiveness of elections in fully
authoritarian regimes: elections either do not take place de jure or the opposition parties are de
facto excluded from participation in electoral processes (see Bogaards and Elischer 2015). The
latter is attributed to hegemonic authoritarian regimes and closed autocracies, where the outcome
of elections is discerned by the absence of uncertainty, due to extensive fraud, candidate
restrictions, severe repression - sometimes in the form of physical violence, imprisonment or exile
- and harassment of the opposition (Levitsky and Way 2010). Classic post-Cold War cases include
Egypt, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, where “elections served functions (e.g. a means of enhancing
regime legitimacy, generating information, or distributing patronage) other than determining who
governed; opponents did not view them as viable means to achieve power” (ibid., 7). However,
because Levitsky and Way ignore the concept of hegemonic authoritarianism (Bogaards and Elischer 2015, 10; see Morse 2012, 187), their classification of certain regimes as competitive authoritarian, falls short of embracing the reality of political dynamics that could account for autocratization process in a number of cases. Indeed, Levitsky and Way do not explain the process of autocratization of regimes they code as stable- and unstable competitive authoritarian. Hence, at what point and through what means do multiparty elections in competitive authoritarian regimes become less- or noncompetitive? What makes a competitive authoritarian regime revert to a closed authoritarianism? Part of the explanation is expected to be found in the assessment of the mainstream literature on democratization, democratic breakdowns, as well as examination of the mechanisms by which competitive- and full autocracies arise and endure. Primarily, the two main approaches that dominate the field of regime transitions have to be explained.

**Part II. Approaches to Regime Transitions: Democratic Breakdowns and Democratization**

**“Macro” Approach.** The first, macro-oriented approach, which dictates the framework of modernization and structural theories, is largely based on identifying economic and social preconditions that facilitated global democratic change. In his empirically rich study, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959, 75; 2000) found a strong correlation between a nation’s level of economic development and stable democratic rule; that is, rising levels of income and education among lower classes, along with urbanization, facilitate changes in class and political cultures conducive to democracy (see Inglehart and Welzel 2010; Østerud 2011). The tenets of his thesis have been prominently questioned by Przeworski and Limongi (1997), who claim that emergence of democracy is not a by-product of economic development, and can be initiated at any level of development; only once it is established, do economic constraints play a role in its survival. Nevertheless, in an up-to-date statistical analysis, Stephan Haggart and Robert R. Kaufman (2016)
find support for modernization theory in cases of autocratic reversions in low-income countries. According to their discoveries, low-income “reverters” outnumber middle-income ones by a wide margin (ibid., 302). But even within these outcomes, the authors find anomalies that directly contradict the expectations of modernization theory: “Low income countries that survive and the handful of more developed middle-income countries that revert” (ibid., 301). Then, in these cases, Haggart and Kaufman (2016) explore the effects of political institutions and performance in “weak democracies.” Typically, in weakly institutionalized systems, incumbents regularly violate constitutional boundaries by resorting to: “extrajudicial harassment, repression, and detention of opponents, often defended on majoritarian grounds” (ibid.). As a consequence, the protection of civil liberties and political rights, which are the main tenets of liberalization, may effectively end (ibid.). In response, opposition groups may “mobilize social forces outside the political arena to offset the constraints associated for playing by the rules,” thereby creating incentives for the incumbent to further its arrogation of executive powers (ibid.). Thus, the authors conclude that even controlling for level of development, political factors, such as praetorianism and weak institutionalization, outweigh the explanatory power of modernization approach. For Haggart and Kaufman (2016, 20) these factors provide “a strong[er] evidence in explaining the incentives of political elites to limit the scope of democratic rule” in what they believe to be elite-driven democratic declines or autocratic reversions in the African, Latin American, Asian, as well as post-communist European, including Turkey, and post-Soviet cases. To O’Donnell and Schmitter ([1986] 2013, 8-9) such dynamic implies not only rigid consolidation of authoritarianism as a result of a threat posed by the democratic opposition, but displays broad reasons for democratic decay in “liberalized autocracies.” Likewise, Ottaway (2003, 13) finds that, “Liberalization and transitional elections can constitute the end of the process rather than its initial phases, creating semi-
authoritarian regimes determined to prevent further change rather than imperfect but still-evolving democracies” (ibid., Diamond 2002).

Correspondingly, the main problem associated with the macro approach, according to Przeworski (1986, 47), is its focus on predominantly economic and social conditions to explain regime transformations, and thus neglect of the short-term political dynamic. Indeed, Lipset’s regime typology is overgeneralized to explain the intricacies of the relationship between economics and types of democracies born out of the third wave of democratization. His study does not account for a dynamic on the government level within unconsolidated democracies, which he superficially categorizes based on income levels, thus attempting to explain the prospects of their survival. In contemporary revisions of democratic breakdowns in Latin America, Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán’s (2013) tripartite classification of democracy – particularly inclusion of semi-democracies - that categorise the region’s political regimes provides a more appropriate analysis of the reasons for this regime change. They find that the breakdowns of competitive regimes in Latin America between 1945 and 2005 were not the consequence of structural predictors, but were rather facilitated by dominant elites’ policy radicalism (due to threat by popular mobilization) and actors’ lack of normative preference for democracy as political regime. Accordingly, a number of scholars maintain that structural factors do not directly cause democratic transformations or breakdowns, but they may influence the behaviour and strategic choices of political actors (ibid., see Mahoney and Snyder 2000; McFaul 2001; Mainwaring 2012; Haggard and Kaufman 2016). Henceforth, structural and modernization theories that guided the analyses of democratization processes in Europe and Latin America in the 1970s were criticized for their overly pessimistic outlook; linear justification of relationship between level of development and type of regime; as well as inapplicability to the later cases of democratic
transitions and breakdowns (Gans-Morse 2004, 325; Carothers 2002; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013). Based on the aforementioned approach, I derive a hypothesis regarding the effect of the degree of institutionalization in richer non-democracies on autocratic reversion:

H1: Weak institutionalization of competitive authoritarian regimes in middle-income countries facilitates non-democratic behaviour on the part of the elites, thus increasing the likelihood of an autocratic backlash.

“Micro” Approach. The fundamental role of human actors in the development (and decline) of democracy was first highlighted by the father of transitology, Dankwart Rustow, in 1970. This micro-oriented approach to regime transitions emphasizes political actors and their strategies; focuses on interests and perceptions embedded in concrete historical situations; as well as formulates problems in terms of possibilities and choices (Rustow 1970; O’Donnell and Schmitter [1986] 1991, O’Donnell et al.; Diamond et al. 1997; Schmitter 2000; see Przeworski 1986, 47). It inspired celebrated studies on democratic breakdowns in Europe (Merkl 1981) and Latin America (Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan 1978) and influenced further studies on democratization as well as dynamics of democratic consolidation (O’Donnell and Schmitter [1986] 2013; O’Donnell et al. 1986; [1986] 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996). In both series of analyses, the demise of democracy is perceived as a result of legitimacy crisis and conflicts within the elite factions (ibid., see Diamond et al. 1997). Likewise, democratization is viewed as a process of negotiation and pacts formed between (moderate) political forces and opposition. Though little has been addressed by these scholars on the factors contributing to democratic stability, others demonstrated the importance of elite unity (Higley and Burton 1989; Etzioni-Halevy 1990) and cooperation between elites and civil society (Putnam 1993; Weingast 1997; O’Donnell 1999).

To reveal further challenges to the “unidirectional evolutionary optimism” of modernization theories, a number of scholars introduced other paths of regime transformation.
Sartori (1975). Sartori (1975) emphasizes continuous (i.e. endogenous transformation) and discontinuous (i.e. via system breakdown) system change; any such change signifies political transitions from one type of system to another transpiring in accordance with the – constitutional - rules and procedures of a given political structure. Similarly, Schedler argues that democratic erosion or system’s decay infers a slow, continuous, and less transparent change (see Maeda 2010, 1130). Schedler (2013, 379) reminds of O’Donnell’s (1994) concern with the ever-present dangers of slow democratic death, whereby contemporary competitive regimes are “undermined by executive encroachment and electoral manipulation.” In line with the actor-based approach, Linz’s (1978) timeless explanation of a democratic breakdown highlights the challenges that the incumbent (hard-liners) faces when disloyal or semiloyal opposition (soft-liners) attempt to change the existing regime at the time of government’s declining legitimacy (Maeda 2010, 1130). Ko Maeda (2010, 1130) complains that Linz does not remark “scenarios where a democratically elected leader does the altering by becoming an authoritarian leader.” By expanding on Schedler’s (1998) distinction between the concepts of “democratic erosion” and “democratic breakdown,” Maeda (2010) thus proposes a more logical distinction between the two types of democratic breakdowns - “endogenous” and “exogenous.” Exogenous terminations signify a system breakdown which occur when changes in the authority structures of a polity emerge beyond and outside its inner constituent mechanisms of change, i.e. military coups (ibid., Sartori 1975; Haggard and Kaufman 2016, 226-8); it implies an abrupt and visible change (Schedler 1998). Conversely, endogenous terminations arise from within the government - where “democratically elected leaders [end] the democratic process themselves through acts like: suspending the constitution, arresting opposition politicians, restricting the activities of the mass media, or rigging electoral results” (ibid.). For example, Venezuelan regime decay - from representative democracy
to participatory competitive authoritarianism - as Mainwaring (2012) argues, was not the result of a declining economy and rising poverty. Rather, the party system collapse occurred due to a gradual erosion of civil liberties, political rights, and an increasingly unlevel playing field – all of which were predicated on the contingent decision-making by freely elected party leaders and Presidents Rafael Caldera and Hugo Chávez (see Levitsky and Way 2002; 2010; Schedler 2013).

**Western Linkage and Leverage.** After the age of military coups (Schedler 2013) and whilst defending the structuralist approach, Levitsky and Way propose a modern way of evaluating external modes of regime transition. Whereas, Western linkage refers to the degree to which competitive authoritarian regimes are linked - politically, economically, diplomatically, or socially – to (influential) Western States such as the United States and the European Union; Western leverage suggests the degree of vulnerability of competitive authoritarian regimes to external democratizing pressures. This international (exogenous) dimension is used by Levitsky and Way to explain the divergent regime trajectories (influence on democratization) across regions. Their study suggests that in cases where both linkage and leverage are low, as in the Middle East, former Soviet Union, and East Asia, “the degree and effectiveness of external pressure is limited” and as a result, domestic (endogenous) factors form regime outcomes (Levitsky and Way 2006a, 380). By contrast, high linkage of Central European and Latin American states intensified international pressure and led to democratization even in cases with unfavourable domestic conditions (ibid., 379). Despite their reasonable empirical findings, there is still difference of opinion concerning this development. As Schedler (2013, 379) allegorically affirms: “Even within their propitious external environment of high Western linkage…Latin American democracies remain vulnerable to subversions by electoral authoritarian wolves in the clothing of radical-democratic sheep.”

The causal logic of Levitsky and Way’s theory has been questioned on many accounts.
What is of concern here, though, is the authors’ treatment of “Western linkage [as] the only causal factor theorized to explain the democratization of competitive authoritarian regimes in the post-Cold War era” (Bogaards and Elischer 2015, 8; see Slater 2011). Bogaards and Elischer fairly criticize this logic: “When linkage is high, democratization is inevitable and when linkage is low, democratization is unthinkable…Democratization, thus, is always exogenous.” In this regard, Bogaards and Elischer (2015, 11) reference Jakob Tolstrup’s (2013) work concerning the endogenous nature of linkage where he shows how “‘gate-keeper elites’ have influenced the degree and direction of economic, intergovernmental, technocratic, social, information, and civil society ties in Belarus and Ukraine.” Although Levitsky and Way include the domestic explanatory factor – organizational power - for the divergent regime trajectories, it still concedes to the causal dominance of the linkage variable. “When linkage is low and organizational power is high, authoritarianism will be the outcome …When linkage and organizational power are both low, leverage comes into play. This accounts for the difference between stable (low leverage) and unstable (high leverage) authoritarianism” (ibid.). Within such reasoning, sources of organizational power, such as state coercive power, ruling party strength, centralization of economy, are of significance only when assessing the incumbent’s capacity to suppress domestic democratic opposition. As Levitsky and Way do not show the causal interaction between the three variables, their theory not only puts in question their regime classification (Bogaards and Elischer 2015, 10; see Morse 2012), but also fails to account for the outcome of full authoritarianism (ibid.; see Kubik 2011) in the process of autocratization. Based on the abovementioned approach to regime change, one may expect that autocratic reversion – from an unconsolidated democracy or competitive authoritarianism – implies a slow and incremental change, endogenously instigated by an incumbent and carried out through authoritarian means. Thus, it is possible to develop two
hypotheses in regards to the notion of an increasing organizational power:

**H2:** Following the prior hypothesis, weak institutionalization of competitive authoritarian regimes facilitates an increase in the sources of organizational power, thereby decreasing the regime’s likelihood to democratize further.

**H3:** High organizational power – coming from state coercive power, ruling party strength, and state control over the economy – is an endogenous process which dictates the means of autocratic reversion toward closed authoritarianism.

**Presidentialism.** While Lipset’s claim concerning economic, social, historical, and cultural factors being most conducive to the sustainment of democracy has been commonly recognized, other scholars explore the role of political institutions in the process of democratic decline (Linz 1996). In terms of causal factors to democratic breakdowns, the constitutional context governing executive-legislative relationships has been accentuated (Maeda 2010). For instance, Linz (1996) argues that presidentialism is inherently more prone to breakdown. To O’Donnell and Schmitter ([1986] 2013, 60) presidential politics is problematic because it jeopardizes democratic consolidation by limiting available options and creating a zero-sum situation that opens up space for conflict. Others view problems with presidential democracies only when accompanied by other features, such as “fragmented party systems, nonconcurrent electoral cycles, strong presidential powers, and opposing legislatures” (Maeda 2010, 1129; see Mainwaring and Shugart 1993; van de Walle 2003). Similarly, for comparativists assessing and operationalizing variants of hybrid and authoritarian regimes, the procedures of executive and legislative elections along with their outcomes are of significant value (Levitsky and Way 2002; Svolik 2012). As per popular perceptions, as Schedler (2013, 193) reminds, presidential results may be more important. Alike, in terms of the electoral process, Lise Rakner and Nicolas van de Walle (2009, 205) assert that “legislative elections are largely a sideshow in what are strong
presidential systems. The key political competition inevitably concerns the presidency, in which resides a disproportionate amount of institutional power and resources.” To these scholars, “the limited resources of opposition parties, combined with the pervasive ability of presidential parties to draw on state resources for clientelism” are those key causal mechanisms for undermining elections as a mode of transition and prompting the weakness of opposition parties in sub-Saharan Africa (ibid.; see Levitsky and Way 2002, 60). As per Levitsky and Way (2002, 60), this is precisely the dynamics of competitive authoritarian regimes, which emerged as a result of collapse of authoritarian regimes in post-communist countries like Russia, Ukraine, Croatia, and Serbia. In these cases, the collapse led to the emergence of new, competitive authoritarian regimes, in which weak electoral regimes arose somewhat by default (ibid.; see Parrott 1997).

By way of Levitsky and Way (2002, 55), “as a rule of thumb, regimes in which presidents are reelected with more than 70% of the vote can generally be considered noncompetitive.” Yet, in their later work, Levitsky and Way (2010, 183) argue against presidentialism being responsible for democratic failure in post-Soviet states, by treating presidential power as a product, rather than a cause, of authoritarianism. For instance, superpresidential constitution in Russia was imposed after Boris Yeltsin had suppressed the parliament. Thus, as the authors contend, regime outcome cannot be determined by constitutional rules such as executive terms limits, for in the case of Russia in 2008, they were “divorced from de facto power distributions” (ibid.). Nevertheless, Levitsky and Way do not trace the effects of the increased presidential powers on the executives’ ability to wrestle with democratic opposition forces that may highlight autocratization tendencies in such regimes. Instead, they prefer to use the earlier explicated variables – linkage, leverage, and organizational power – to account for the rise and endurance of competitive authoritarianism in six post-Soviet states. Although it is still debatable whether presidentialism is responsible for
democratic failure (O'Donnell and Schmitter [1986] 2013), expansion of presidential powers - through alteration and/or suspension of the constitution – have revealed increasing authoritarian tendencies of the incumbents in non-consolidated democracies (Linz 1994; McFaul 2001; Fish 2005). Thus, the fourth hypothesis may be derived:

**H4:** In the context of low linkage and an increasing organizational power, expansion of presidential powers in competitive authoritarian regimes not only facilitates authoritarian consolidation but represents an endogenous termination of such regime.

In sum, termination of hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism in particular, signifies an endogenous change - at times in accordance with constitutional procedures – controlled by the elites, who are determined to prevent democratization. They achieve this by manipulating weak democratic institutions. In this sense, the intricacies of an endogenous termination of competitive authoritarianism and the mechanisms by which elites are able to consolidate authoritarianism may be useful for further evaluation of the dynamics of autocratic reversion. It is therefore necessary to turn to theories of authoritarian endurance.

**Part III: Autocratic Endurance and Reversion**

As per the earlier discussion, one of the ways to control the process in semi-authoritarian, electoral- or competitive authoritarian regimes is through the very democratic institutions (i.e. legislatures and political parties) that helped given elites come to power (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). These institutions, in turn, are indispensable for certain autocrats to “neutralize threats from larger groups within society and to solicit the cooperation of outsiders” (Gandhi and Adam Przeworski 2007, 1280). Moreover, partisan legislatures in particular incorporate potential opposition forces, investing them with a stake in the ruler’s survival (ibid.). Consequently, by broadening the basis of support for the ruler and expanding their
monopoly of force (Svolik 2012), these institutions lengthen his tenure. In O’Donnell and Schmitter’s terms, it points to the hostile internal dynamic within the authoritarian ruling elite – conflict between hard-liners and soft-liners – that resulted in the former’s consolidation of power, thus eliminating the possibility for a negotiated pact with the reformers and protraction of liberalization which the domination of soft-liners would entail (Lindberg 2009, 322). To Svolik (2009; 2012) this opens up a space for the problem of authoritarian control (power-sharing problem). Dictatorships resolve this problem either by repression or co-optation. Even though the authors’ vibrant elucidations on the rise of competitive authoritarian regimes reveal certain intricacies in the way such regimes operate, and how they are able to survive (rather than democratize further), the causes and means of autocratic reversions have not been uncovered.

In 2002, Schedler observes that elections are a double-edged sword. As demonstrated prior, they can facilitate consolidation of the authoritarian rule (as a result of democratic decay) and even ensure its durability. As Jason Brownlee (2007, 9) puts it: “Manipulated elections do not signify change in themselves, but they do provide a visible indicator of political competition, even as they call for deeper inquiry into the sources of such contestation.” Indeed, “Despite being held under conditions that are neither free nor fair, elections under authoritarian regimes provide information about rulers, their critics, and the support competing factions command in the wider population (ibid.). Nevertheless, even within the authoritarian setting, elections may help opposition gain the upper hand and pose a significant challenge to the autocratic incumbent (ibid., see Gandhi 2014, 181). To prevent this from happening, the dictator must possess strong enough resources to impede challenges by those who are excluded from power (Svolik 2012). After all, in dictatorships, even when political power is nominally exercised through institutions, it must be backed by a ‘credible threat of violence’ (Svolik 2009, 479). In this regard, it is vital to point out that, at times, when it
comes to an executive selection in authoritarian regimes, elections cease to constitute the main arena of contestation.

Hence, it is worth turning to Way’s (2015) recent analysis concerning the impact of different levels of organizational capacity of the incumbent elite on their ability to uphold authoritarianism. So Way explains varying regime trajectories in the post-Soviet space, highlighting the ruling elite dynamics at the start of the countries’ transition in the early 1990s. When key sources of authoritarian durability – states and ruling parties – are weak, there arises a struggle in four key dimensions: “elections, the media, the legislature, and opposition challenges” (Way 2015, 9). In the absence of a strong ruling party, as it was the case in Russia, the opposition was strengthened due to the possibility of (high-level) defections and weakened control over the legislature (ibid.). In certain cases, and in the short run, such weak organization, according to Way, reinforced “democratic institutions such as elections and the legislature that otherwise have little historical grounding or autonomous sources of power” (ibid., 9-10). Yet, the author finds that over time, strengthening of resources for the organizational power – state coercive capacity, party strength, and economic control - increases the incumbent’s access to organizational mechanisms to suppress popular dissent and opposition groups, as well as promote further elite cohesion. Moreover, it could be argued that the discretionary economic power, found in the hands of the Russian elite (‘oligarchs’), equipped the incumbent with powerful tools to induce compliance as well as punish and/or starve opposition (Levitsky and Way 2006b, 393; Way 2015; see Fish 2005). As in the immediate post-Soviet Russia the incumbent chose not to build a party, handed the means of central control of economy to individual actors, while coercive apparatus was underfunded - the party-state capacity was labeled as low (Way 2015, 144-5). By the late 1990s, as Way (2015, 146-9) notices, due to Yeltsin’s ability to recentralize economic control by appointing security officials
to key positions and allowing privatization of key industries (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005; Kryshtanovskaya 2008), parliamentary opposition in the coming years was effectively eliminated, thus allowing Vladimir Putin to grip unilateral control over the national regime.

The case of Russia’s autocratic reversion uncovers hidden details behind the electoral processes skillfully fashioned by the ruling elite via increasing state power. Like this, Russian transition of the 1990s is illustrative of how liberalization and transitional elections become the end-process as a result of elites’ deliberate decision to prevent further democratization. Based on the above overview, Russia’s competitive authoritarianism started to decay in 1996 and the regime was ‘closed’ by 2004. This claim goes against Levitsky and Way’s classification of Russia’s regime as stable competitive authoritarian through 2008. Relying on the compilation of studies presenting various variables to account for divergent outcomes of regime transitions, the final hypotheses may be proposed:

H5: Increasing organizational power in an oligarchic state leads to the conflict of power-sharing.

H6: Once the power-sharing problem is alleviated, elections cease to represent the essential arena of contestation, thus putting in question the validity of procedural classification of certain hybrid regimes.

Case of Russia: From Competitive to Closed Authoritarianism (1991 – 2004)

Introduction. The period of post-Soviet state-building in Russia is widely perceived as a rapid transition from a single-party form of government to a regime that was arguably the most democratic the country has ever experienced. However, unlike some of its former satellite republics in Eastern Europe and the former communist Eastern Bloc, Russia’s advancement toward democracy has been widely observed as a failure (Schröder 2008). In general terms, while in the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a sharp decline of central state control, the
state’s organizational capacity was rapidly ascending (Way 2015). Whereas the party strength will boost tremendously under Putin’s influence during his occupation of three strategic positions in the Russian government during 1999, recentralization of economy via liberal market reforms and vast privatization of key industries were well underway in the midst of Russia’s state collapse in the post-Soviet years. Effectiveness and further consequences of these political endeavors cannot be detached from the fact that Russia is a nuclear petrostate (Rutland 2015) with a vast military capacity (Shevtsova 2010, 154; Levitsky and Way 2010, 187); which, in Levitsky and Way’s terms (2010, 186), makes the country a case of low linkage and low leverage. Consequently, in this case, it is of critical importance to focus on domestic factors that form regime outcomes. Siding with Bogaards and Elischer’s critical standpoint on the low linkage as being determinant of a country’s authoritarian outcome, these external modes of regime transition will be left out of the Russian case study. Rather, the endogenous factors, revolving around organizational power, and intimately linked to the problem of power-sharing on the elite level, provide a more plausible framework for the explanation of Russia’s autocratic reversion. By the same token, four time-periods (marked by chapters) - during which a superpresidential constitution was installed, the playing field was becoming increasingly unleveled, regional powers effectively eliminated, and vast degree of coercion placed in the hands of security forces - will be expounded to justify the country’s transition from competitive to closed authoritarianism. Firstly, however, the putative taxonomy of Russia’s regime trajectory has to be presented.

**Categorizing Russia’s regime (1993-2008)**

Classifying Russia’s regime during its transitional post-communist period has been a difficult task for a number of scholars. Most agree that in the early and mid-1990s the system was hybrid, and the prospects of it becoming “more authoritarian or more democratic was very much
in the balance” (Plattner 2002, xxi; see McFaul 2001; Schröder 2008).

In 1999, Russia was still viewed as partly democratic by the mainstream democracy indices (Baturo and Elkink 2016, 77). For instance, “Polity IV (Marshall and Jaggers 2011) upgrades Russia from partly democratic at +3 in 1999 to democracy at +6 in 2000, mainly due to its very arguable improvement in executive constrains; in 2007 it downgrades Russia to +4” (ibid.). Thus, between 2000 and 2006 Russia remains a democracy, while this period in particular has been observed by many scholars as “a period of quite dramatic authoritarianization” (Linde and Ekman 2009; Shevtsova 2010). Another index presented by Freedom House suggests that since the fall of the Soviet Union Russia’s democracy has been in continuous decline, treating it as partly democratic until 2004, when the regime becomes unfree (Baturo and Elkink 2016, 77; Linde and Ekman 2009, 103). To Svolik (2012) Russia is authoritarian from 2005. While Barbara Geddes et al. (2014) treat the country’s regime as “personal autocracy ever since Yeltsin’s takeover of 1993,” it is vital to mention that Geddes (2003; 2014) reaffirms her stance on personalist dictatorships being the ones least likely to democratize. In 2008, Jennifer Gandhi does not define Russia as a dictatorship (Baturo and Elkink 2016, 77). Yet, in her later work, in collaboration with Cheibub and Vreeland, Gandhi (2010) treats Russia as a dictatorship between 1991 and 2008, “and - since Russia is not defied as democratic – include[s] neither 1993 paraconstitutional changes nor [the] 2008 manipulation of term limits as instances of ‘consolidation of incumbency advantage’” (ibid.). Comparably, Levitsky and Way (2010, 212) claim that Russia remains competitive authoritarian through 2008.

The scholarly ambivalence as to what regime type befitted Russia in the post-1999 period has raised difficulties for identifying the interval of its authoritarian reversal. Even in the early 2000s, McFaul concluded that “neither popular desires for stability and security nor Putin’s lack of commitment to democracy need necessarily translate into authoritarianism” (Plattner 2002, xix).
However, the following analysis of the political conditions under which Putin came to power and the mechanisms of control at his disposal will suggest otherwise. For instance, in their study on Russia’s post-Soviet regime trajectory, Baturo and Elkink (2016, 77) observe “an increased executive control and curtailment of political freedoms and civil liberties overtime.” While tracing the dynamics of Russia’s regime personalization from 1999 to 2014 and juxtaposing them with authoritarian reversion, these authors highlight the steady acquisition of an increased executive authority from early in 2000 (ibid., 77-8). Interestingly, Baturo and Elkink claim that this became possible due to a more consistent leveraging of “the presidential powers enshrined in the 1993 constitution that were not fully utilized by Yeltsin (Levitsky and Way 2010, 82) – so that sometime in 2004 the president has indisputable authority over the executive, legislative, judiciary, and enforcement branches at the federal and regional levels” (ibid.). Thus, it makes sense to commence with the political occurrences of the immediate post-Soviet period in Russia when Yeltsin consolidates competitive authoritarianism.

**Chapter 1. Competitive Authoritarianism in Russia: 1993 - 1996**

**Background.** In June 1991 - six months before the official dissolution of the Soviet Union - Yeltsin had been elected the first president of the Russian republic. A number of witnesses of the regime changeover found that the failed 1991 August putsch that had brought Russian democrats to power, signified the ‘end of transition’ as well as “demarcated the ‘death of communism’ or the end of Bolshevik rule” (McFaul 1991, 122). In the fall of the same year, Russian leaders were primarily concerned with the economic reform, while designing new political institutions was given a secondary, yet instrumental role. In order to enhance economic policy implementation, Yeltsin and his close advisors believed that a strong executive authority had to be imposed (McFaul 2001, 146-7). However, as “[t]he constitutional amendment that had created the office of the
presidency was approved in haste just weeks before presidential elections in June 1991,” neither Yeltsin nor anyone else in the Kremlin “really understood what the powers of the presidency were or should be” (ibid., 147). Yet, the legislature allowed Yeltsin to rule by decree for one year beginning November 1991, thus authorizing him to “assume complete and independent responsibility for forming a new government” (ibid.). Thenceforth, Yeltsin was committed to strengthening the presidential power by expanding his authority at the national- and subnational level. However, “Yeltsin did not directly challenge the authority of the oblast soviets1, [as] no document delineated the division of powers and responsibilities between the center and regions” (ibid., 149).

In August 1991, in the absence of the Soviet President and General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, a group of hard-liners from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) - who did not support Gorbachev’s perestroika reform - attempted to take control over the Soviet government. During the putsch, Yeltsin allied with the Russian Congress of People’s Deputies2 - which he had chaired prior to the coup - to defend the Russian White House (Parliament). Given the scale of popular support for democratic change during mass demonstrations in front of the parliament, Yeltsin was able to gain momentum. Although Gorbachev had returned to his position, his political career, along with the plans to preserve the Soviet Union, were destroyed. By then, Yeltsin had already managed to subvert the ministries, and conspired with the president of Ukraine and the leader of Belarus to dissolve the USSR by signing the Belavezha Accords.3

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1 In this case, the term “soviets” refers to the elected local or district officials in the former Soviet Union.
2 Established in 1990, the Congress of People’s Deputies of Russia was a supreme government institution that prior to its 1993 dissolution by presidential decree had the power to pass and amend the Constitution; declare referendums; impeach the President; approve the Russian Prime Minister and other high-ranking government officials, including judges of the Constitutional Court.
3 It is worth mentioning that the signing of the Belavezha Accords violated the popular demand to preserve the Soviet Union. Referendum results showed that the majority of Soviet citizens (about 72 percent) voted to keep the USSR.
During the transitional period in the fall of 1991, the Communist Party’s central control over the state had waned, while the new political scene witnessed the rise of several parties. The Congress of Peoples’ Deputies, which functionally surpassed the generic parliament, had to be either restructured or eliminated to make room for new democratic institutions. However, since its deputies were elected rather than appointed, the Congress was far more legitimate than other institutions (ibid.). Therefore, dissolving this organization - which was implied by holding new parliamentary elections scheduled for December 1991 – would be “detrimental to Yeltsin’s own legitimacy and reform agenda” (ibid., 152). Yet, as McFaul (2001, 153) puts it, “…efforts devoted to legitimizing this set of institutions impeded the creation of new ones.”

By the same token, near the end of the Soviet Union’s existence, there arose debates surrounding the process of ratification of the new constitution. In November 1991, despite the expressed urge of the Secretary of the Constitutional Committee, Oleg Rumyantsev, to pass a new constitution, Yeltsin blocked the action. Although passing the constitution would have solidified his presidential power, in fear of Russian federal disintegration, Yeltsin was predominantly preoccupied with expansion of his authority nation-wide, as well as with issues related to the Soviet dissolution and economic reform (ibid., 154). Meanwhile, Yeltsin’s colleagues refused to take part in the constitution’s ratification process that would reaffirm the ultimate authority of the Congress, which, according to the old constitution, was allowed to vote on a new one and could thus vote to postpone it (ibid.). In his interview with McFaul (2001, 154), then presidential advisor, Mikhail Krasnov, revealed that: “It [was] impossible to create new institutions using the institutions of the old; conflict [in these situations] [was] inevitable.”

Following the official dissolution of the USSR on December 26th, 1991, Russia emerged as an independent state. Although, compared to its preceding authoritarian regime, Russia was
now somewhat democratic and was underway in becoming a market economy, the divisions between political forces led to the ambiguity about Russia’s democratization course. This chapter underscores the strengthening of the executive at the national level along with the radical economic liberalization policies as detrimental for Russia’s further prospects of becoming a democracy.

Analysis. In the procedural sense, it is fair to state that “post-Soviet Russia was never a democracy” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 191). In fact, there was never a period in history when Russia could be nearly compared to a Western-type liberal democracy, with a custom of the rule of law. Equally, the post-Soviet Russian government embedded a centuries-long political and economic culture, strongly resting upon “obedience to authority, arbitrarily defined, from tsars to commissars” (Shinar 2015, 584). This phenomenon can be primarily highlighted by the process and outcome of the rigid privatization campaign of the early transition period; which gave rise to new economic inequalities as a result of appropriation of state assets (ibid., 584-5). In 1991, while formally committed to Russia’s democratic development, Yeltsin officially called for the liberalization of prices, macroeconomic stabilization, and privatization (ibid.). This feature of his rule, according to Richard Sakwa (2005, 5), “undermined the [very] achievements of his ambition,” as it represented “the unhealthy penetration of economic interests into the decision-making process.” As a result, “successive programmes of privatization transferred state property into private hands; income differentials widened rapidly; and at the top, a new group of super-rich emerged, whose assets commanded respect not just within Russia itself but internationally” (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005, 294). These ‘oligarchs’ were in command of powerful resources that combined banking, sections of heavy and light industry, and the mass media (ibid.).

On the other side of the spectrum, political liberalization that began in Russia in the late 1980s and continued following the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1991 gave hope to democratic
opposition forces (Lussier 2011, 291). Indeed, besides being held regularly, the parliamentary (as well as provincial and local) and especially, presidential elections, were marked by a high degree of uncertainty (Levitsky and Way 2010; McFaul 2001; Lynch 2005; Way 2015). In his recent work, Way (2015, 146-7) confirms that in the early 1990s, Russia’s regime competition was high, marked by “a powerful legislature, extremely competitive elections, strong opposition challenges, and a vibrant independent media” (see Lussier 2011). Aptly, a number of scholars (Lussier 2011) treat the intricacies of the immediate post-Soviet political development in Russia as non-causal to the political dynamics of the country’s autocratic reversal by the year 2000. However, although during the perestroika period Russia’s political institutions were reformed to set the country on its democratic path, its inexperience with electoral systems (McFaul 2001, 15), the lack of a tradition of a free media (Oates 2005), and political elite disunity (Shevtsova 2010) - led to the manifestation of a unique model of resilience of the state’s authoritarian power for the upcoming decade. Besides unremitting failures of leadership and the weakness of the Russian democrats, Shevtsova (2010, 153-6) finds another key factor that not only “complicat[ed] Russia’s transformation into a rule-of-law state … [but] prevented the Russian elite from forging a consensus about the new rules of the game, neutralizing the influence of history, and overcoming the systemic constraints involved in reforming a nuclear superpower.” She stresses the 1991 rise on the political scene of a new institution - The Congress of Peoples’ Deputies of the Russian Federation, whose Soviet-time deputies refused to leave (ibid., 155-6). Another political institution that Russia attained following Yeltsin’s inauguration was the presidency. Both of these institutions possessed democratic legitimacy and engaged in a fierce fight for a monopoly on power, thus splitting the Russian political elite and posing difficulties for the state-building process (ibid). According to Shevtsova (2010, 156) “it was this power struggle between Yeltsin and the Congress that undermined
Russia’s chances for transformation in 1991-93.” Indeed, during the 1993 constitutional crisis, Yeltsin dissolved the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation – a governing legislative body elected by the Congress – and held elections to the newly established parliament, called the State Duma. This event had radically changed the course of Russia’s regime building.

As per Levitsky and Way (2010, 186-7), the country’s regime stability during the early period of transition was threatened by low state- and party capacity (see Way 2015). Rather than building a strong party, Yeltsin invested heavily in expanding his personal authority. Despite the support of several parties – Democratic Russia, the Party of Russian Unity and Concord (PRES), Russia’s Choice, Our Home is Russia, and Russia’s Democratic Choice – the president did not form a stable organization; cohesion was thus low (Levitsky and Way 2010, 188; McFaul 2001, 155-6). Organizational as well as incumbent’s weakness, in turn, contributed to regime instability in the early 1990s, as Yeltsin continually faced challenges from the parliamentary opposition (ibid., 191-2; McFaul 2001).

The crucial challenge to the regime came from Yeltsin’s own appointee as the chairman of the Russian Congress, Ruslan Khasbulatov, who, along with Vice President Alexander Rutskoi, had moved into opposition in early 1992, and nearly impeached Yeltsin in March 1993 (Levitsky and Way 2010, 191-2; McFaul 2001, 151-2). Despite the ownership of vast power resources – media, economic ministries, patronage, and security forces, - the lack of a party rendered Yeltsin’s inability to manage intra-elite rivalries or maintain control over the legislature (ibid.). When in September of the same year Yeltsin failed “to secure legislative approval of a new constitution ([whilst] seeking to prevent passage of a pro-parliamentary constitution), [he] dissolved parliament by decree and called a constitutional referendum and new parliamentary elections for December” (ibid.; McFaul 2001). As the decree was proclaimed unconstitutional by the Russia’s
Constitutional Court and hundreds of legislators along with the Congress voted to impeach Yeltsin and elected Rutskoi in as president, the former decided to suppress the dissent by ordering military units to storm the parliament (ibid.). This most important political conflict in the post-Soviet period in Russia was thus resolved by force rather than by vote (Lynch 2005). Immediately following the October putsch, Rutskoi and Khasbulatov were jailed. In theoretical terms, regardless of the type of ‘democracy with adjectives’ assigned by democracy advocates to Russia in the early 1990s, from this point on, the system was irrefutably competitive authoritarian.

**Superpresidential Constitution.** In competitive authoritarian systems, Levitsky and Way underline the importance of a reasonably leveled playing field between incumbents and opposition. As said before, in such regime, incumbent’s excessive manipulation of state institutions and resources significantly limits the opposition’s capacity to compete. Although the authors exemplify the 1996 election to prove the case, its dynamics could have played out differently if Yeltsin had not had the capacity to ‘personally sanction high-intensity coercive action against parliament’ in 1993. McFaul (2001) explains that it was Yeltsin’s victory in the October 1993 conflict that created the conditions to impose a new superpresidential constitution, thus allowing him to elect a new parliament and form his administrative staff (Levitsky and Way 2010, 192-3; Lynch 2005, 152-3). This provision, as per Lynch (2005, 152), “has turned out to be the operative key to understanding high politics in Russia in recent years.” Consequently, the newly elected legislatures no longer had real influence upon the executive policy, and the (indirect) constituent influence on the state had then been lost (Lynch 2005, 149; Zielonka 1996, 210-2). It is thus not surprising that the fundamental government policy was not affected by the fact that Yeltsin’s opponents won two consecutive parliamentary elections in December 1993 and December 1995 (Lynch 2005, 149; McFaul 2001). Hereof, Yeltsin administration’s unilateral decision to invade
Chechnya for the first time in December 1994 meant that the Duma was not at all consulted (ibid.).

Furthermore, the parliament’s power of impeachment has become nearly unattainable: “Impeachable offences are limited to treason and high crimes. To file the charge, a two-thirds vote is required in the Duma, while actual removal requires a two-thirds vote in the upper house” (Zielonka 1996, 211). Such increasing disparity between the executive and legislative branches evidently helped legitimize and institutionalize the powerful presidency, thereby obstructing Russia’s ability to democratize further (ibid., Fish 2005, 193-243). McFaul (2001, 312) adds that “the 1993 constitution makes constitutional amendment extremely difficult, especially if the most powerful person in the system has an interest in maintaining the status quo.” Indeed, the October 1993 clampdown and installation of a new constitution led to the termination of parliament’s independence from the Kremlin as well as from the government; the parliament became “firmly subordinated to the supreme power, and there was no more talk about the independence of the courts” (Kryshtanovskaya 2008, 590-1). McFaul’s (2001, 312) prediction was that this illiberal development – an institutional design produced directly by the nature of Russia’s transition – would be very difficult to reverse. In fact, this kind of reversion was already impossible, nor desirable on the part of the ruling elite. Intriguingly, despite the sharp constitutional changes that bestowed vast presidential powers to Yeltsin, his leadership skills were weak (Levitsky and Way 2010; Way 2015). As such, “the Russian presidency has developed an informal staff structure that has become the linchpin of Russian politics, in many respects duplicating the formal structure of government ministries and agencies” (Lynch 2005, 152).

In general terms, “In Russia’s superpresidentialist system, the word of the president is decisive…nothing of importance happens without presidential approval…access to the president is all” (ibid.; see Zaznaev 2008). However, the authoritarian ‘pyramid of power’ that Yeltsin had
crafted could not be sustained by his weak leadership skills. In order to operate as a ‘vehicle of [authoritarian] governance’, “it require[d] a highly competent, informed, skillful, and interventionist chief executive to function” (Lynch 2005, 153). Putin’s background and personality will prove fit for this leadership role (ibid.; see Way 2015). Overall, the violent dissolution of the first Russian parliament in 1993 represents the vital halt in the democratization process (White 2008, 7; Zaznaev 2008; McFaul 2001, 197-8; Mendras 2012, 91). In addition to this incident, as per Mendras (2012, 91) the military occupation of Chechnya in 1994 marked the beginning of a downward spiral, with the leaders in Kremlin not adhering to the two fundamental principles of a democratic state: free voting and parliamentary representation on the one hand, and real federalism with respect for regional autonomies and minority rights on the other.

**Deduction.** Given Russia’s rather unique path of economic reforms, heavily based on the clientelistic mode of interaction between political and business elite, the case does not fit the conventional framework of modernization theory. Rising levels of income, education, and urbanization are not descriptive of developmental dynamic in Russia following the collapse of communism. First of all, the education level of the Russian population was high even prior to the collapse of communism, and rising concentration of the working population in major cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg has already been prevalent since the 20th century. Moreover, considering Russia’s vast oil and metal wealth along with the rigid privatization policy that enabled further extraction and export of these resources, the country represents the case of a middle- to high income country “reverter” – an anomaly to the customary principle of modernization theory.

Instead, in accordance with Haggart and Kaufman’s (2016) notion, the effects of political institutions and their performance in a weak democracy should be primarily considered. Elite disunity during the early stages of state-building led to the failure of setting Russia on the path of
becoming a liberal democracy. In turn, weak institutionalization of Russia’s regime in the early transitional years explains the rise of a favourable setting that enabled Yeltsin to further violate constitutional boundaries by resorting to repression, extrajudicial harassment of opposition, and subsequently, expand his executive powers. Accordingly, incumbent’s policy radicalism and lack of normative preference for democracy (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013; Shevtsova 2010) signify the contingent character of competitive authoritarianism in Russia, as the government commenced to exhibit severer authoritarian elements: bombing and shutting down the parliament, attempting to exclude opposition candidates from elections, and subsequent installation of the superpresidential constitution in 1993. This supports the earlier theoretical claim that alteration or suspension of the constitution by an incumbent point to an increasing authoritarianism in a weak democracy (Linz1994; Fish 2005). Since competitive authoritarianism was in its consolidation stage while state’s organizational power was low, the mechanisms by which the incumbent was able to manipulate political institutions to revert the regime’s course toward a more closed system were not yet apparent. Moreover, since the key sources of authoritarian durability – state and ruling party (Way 2015, 9) – were absent at that time, and repeated efforts of power abuse for the sake of retaining the executive control had not yet occurred, theories on authoritarian endurance could not be discussed in this timeline. However, based on the aforementioned analysis of the immediate political occurrences in post-Soviet Russia, Hypothesis 1 holds.


Background. Following the clampdown on the parliament, Yeltsin began the installation of new political institutions – i.e. electoralism (McFaul 2001, 304). To retain the regime's legitimacy, Yeltsin decided that both national and regional government officials had to be elected by the people (ibid.). Although many key political actors opposed his new institutional design, the
powerful presidency in particular, the majority of them opted into the new system rather than fighting the new regime (ibid.). Between 1993 and 1995, the majority of Russian politicians – both opposition and the ruling elite – observed that the balance of power was shifting considerably toward the opposition (ibid., 279-89). During those years, steep economic decline, devastating war in Chechnya, as well as increasing crime rate averted public support for Yeltsin (ibid., 279). In the meantime, opposition took the opportunity to cease political power by appealing to popular grievances. Notably, the results of the 1995 parliamentary election revealed that the public had high support for the party with nationalist and racist rhetoric – Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), headed by Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

The 1995 parliamentary election was “the first election in Russia to be held in accordance with a law that had been approved by an elected parliament and an elected executive” (ibid., 288). However, as observed by McFaul, this election was procedurally flawed: “Pockets of falsification, including massive irregularities in Chechnya, tainted the results … [while] Our Home is Russia grossly violated spending limits and dominated the national television airwaves” (ibid.). Yet, there was not enough evidence to suggest that these electoral violations influenced the results in a meaningful way (ibid., 289). Ultimately, the 1993 and 1995 elections resulted in the selection of officials to a body with limited powers (ibid.). As nearly “ninety percent of the electorate voted against Yeltsinism in December [1995] … [the] logical conclusion of such interpretations was that Yeltsin should surely lose a free and fair election in June 1996” (ibid.). The following analysis is set to demonstrate how the political environment of the mid-1990s led to the application of the new rules of the game during the 1996 presidential election. While this election allowed Yeltsin to retain his power, the decline of competitive authoritarianism was unprecedented.

**Analysis.** As Russia’s regime at that time was in hybrid form, its weakness was manifested
through the insecurity of elections (Shevtsova 2001). It is said that in hybrid regimes, electoral rights and processes may facilitate the costs of both oppression and toleration, “thus serving as causal factors in both democratization and its inverse: autocratization” (Lindberg 2009, 317). Contrary to the popular claim that repeated elections in competitive authoritarian systems increase the chance of democratic installation (Lindberg 2009), in the case of Russia, repeated elections - especially presidential elections – expose an ever-increasing power of an incumbent persistently undermining the democratization process (Lynch 2005). Here, the ability to undermine democratization is reflected in an increase in the key source of organizational power: recentralization of economy in the hands of the emerging business elite supporting the regime. In this regard, Russia’s peculiar combination of authoritarian democratic elements can be understood as emerging from a series of dilemmas of hybrid regime governance (Petrov et al. 2013, 2).

Besides mass media and state institutions, one of the dilemmas that Russia’s regime faced was the dilemma of elections (ibid.). By 1995, mass media and major state institutions were in the hands, or at the very least, heavily controlled, by the new business elite, who were not only dealing “with a state that … [refused] to accept responsibility for enforcing the rule of law, but also encouraged expectations of reward in exchange for political support” (Shinar 2015, 586). In terms of the dilemma of elections then, rulers of hybrid regimes, as Petrov et al. (2013, 4) claim, react “neither by accepting free and fair elections nor by eliminating elections. Instead, they manipulate elections and find other ways to minimize the chances that the population will oust them…” Such tactic implies clientelistic nature of interaction between the incumbent and business elite, which rapidly rose to politics through undermining the democratic means of political contestation. Thus, to these authors, “Russia is held up as a prime example of a country that subverts the democratic content of elections while still allowing some opposition on the ballot in major elections” (ibid.).
Such dynamic was in turn facilitated by a significant concentration of economic wealth – as source of an increasing state and party capacity – in the hands of the oligarchs supporting the incumbent.

Undeniably, during the early stages of the country’s transition, and in the absence of a single party, unifying ideology, and state’s (strong) monopoly of force – the only viable way for the Russian elites to continue legitimating their rule was through elections (Shevtsova 2001, 66). “But in a situation where power remains undivided, authoritarian elements linger, and civil society is weak, democratic institutions (above all, elections) increasingly take on an imitative, surrogate character and begin to ring hollow” (ibid.). Similarly, Levitsky and Way (2010) emphasize possible intimidation of the opposition and falsification of elections as an observable feature of competitive authoritarianism. In the case of the 1996 election, both occurred. In fact, the 1996 presidential election “confirmed the incumbent in office in circumstances that […] raised serious questions about the fairness of the procedure” (ibid.; McFaul 2001; Levitsky and Way 2010). It is important to remind of Russia’s rather exceptional trajectory of democratization: democratization (electoral participation) and marketization (economic structural market reform) ensued “at the expense of one another rather than in tandem” (Lynch 2005, 150). Russia’s post-Soviet economy was not favorable for the majority of the population, which repeatedly expressed its grievances, thereby questioning “the capacity of Russian politicians and political institutions to establish political order that is responsive to broad sectors of the population” (ibid.).

While until 1994 Yeltsin’s democratic credentials as the defender of the new Russia against the ‘communist backlash’ succeeded, in January 1996, his popularity was at its lowest (Medras 2012, 88-101). Yeltsin’s potential for reelection hit rock bottom in 1995. Failure to gain legitimacy was partly due to the devastating aftermath of the violence in Chechnya that lasted from December 1994 until August 1996, as the vast majority of Russians were against this war and supported non-
violent ideology that upheld freedoms of ethnic minorities (Medras 2012, 90). This attitude will be very different in the fall of 1999, when the second war in Chechnya instigated by Putin - then the chief of the FSB - is officially justified by the fight against terrorism and “pave[s] the way for an increasing recourse to the arbitrary exercise of power and the success of [his] methods from 1999” (ibid.; see Lynch 2005, 157). Most importantly, however, rigid privatization, along with Prime Minister Yegor Gaydar’s unsuccessful liberal policy, led the economy and Russian society to the brink of collapse (Medras 2012, 91; Levitsky and Way 2010, McFaul 2001). The elections proved to be extremely challenging for Yeltsin’s government and revealed the hesitance of society about the regime (ibid.). It was therefore necessary for Yeltsin to make it seem that he adhered to the democratic practices while his own survival was at stake. McFaul (2001, 302) observes that in the run-up to the 1996 presidential elections, Yeltsin followed the electoral process he himself had outlined in the 1993 constitution, but he did not play fairly (see Levitsky and Way 2010; Lynch 2005, 150-1). In certain Russian republics, where support for the Communist Party has always been high, dramatic decline, as McFaul posits, “can only be explained by the active intervention of state officials, be it stuffing ballot boxes or threatening local officials to deliver the correct vote count” (ibid.). Additionally, by employing the tactics such as choice polarization presented to the Russian constituency, Yeltsin was able to structure the vote in his favour (Lynch 2005, 151).

Furthermore, the Yeltsin campaign grossly infringed the spending limits outlined in the presidential election law, especially as he monopolized control of the national media which gave him an unfair advantage in the 1996 vote (ibid.). Indeed, as Lynch (2005, 151) finds, Yeltsin possessed several advantages through “the direct and indirect use of his governmental powers that seriously distorted the choices before the voters.” The indirect use of governmental powers was manifested in Yeltsin forming a clientelistic network comprised of rich donors, whom he allowed
to privatize key resources. At that time, two of Russia’s three major television stations – ORT, RTR, and NTV – were in the hands of the oligarchs supporting the president. Berezovsky, who had gained direct access to the Kremlin via personal ties to Yeltsin’s Family, managed Russia’s main television channel - ORT (Russian Public Television). Thus, in 1996, he “helped bankroll Yeltsin’s re-election as president” (Shinar 2015, 587). Vladimir Gusinsky’s NTV (Independent Television) also played a key role in Yeltsin campaign (ibid., Levitsky and Way 2010, 194). The oligarchs’ meddling in these elections clearly restricted opposition’s access to the airwaves.

Likewise, as Levitsky and Way (2010, 194) declare, “Tens of millions of dollars in government bonds were diverted to Yeltsin’s campaign, and in a highly dubious ‘loans for shares’ arrangement, the government obtained millions of dollars in loans – never expected to be repaid - in exchange for shares in key petroleum firms that had yet to be privatized” (see McFaul 2001; Shinar 2015). This allowed bankers such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky to gain ownership of valuable oil reserves for an unreasonably low price (ibid.). Yet, despite a strong evidence of irregularities, neither Gennady Zyuganov (leader of the Communist Party) nor any other opposition leader challenged the results of the elections (ibid.). In fact, as Lynch (2005, 151) affirms, “the Yeltsin government funded and guided the candidacy of another candidate, former General Lebed, who acquired 14.5 percent of the vote in the first round and – by siphoning off part of the anti-Yeltsin protest vote that otherwise would have gone to the Communist Zyuganov – assured Yeltsin’s narrow edge over Zyuganov (a difference of 1.7 percent of the vote would have place Zyuganov ahead of Yeltsin).” Hence, the ability of the governing elite to draw on state resources for clientelism have not only weakened the opposition parties, but served as causal mechanisms for

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4 Refers to a small group of Yeltsin’s advisors, headed by his daughter Tatyana. Her husband, Valentin Yumashev, along with a number of oligarchs (later including Berezovsky) were considered part of this inner circle. Tatyana served as Yeltsin’s personal advisor during his 1996 re-election campaign.
undermining elections as a mode of transition (Rakner and van de Walle 2009, 205) in Russia.

Ultimately, for Lynch (2005, 151), the 1996 presidential election in Russia represents a model by which one should perceive the country’s electoral future. Truly, in Russia, “…elections, however free, without reliable means for representatives to influence policy, do not form the basis for democracy, much less constitutional government” (Lynch 2005, 151-2). Nonetheless, in light of their term – competitive authoritarianism - Levitsky and Way (2010, 196) posit that Russia’s regime under Yeltsin was highly competitive, mainly due to the incumbent’s weakness and his inability to form a party; and competitive enough to display to the Russian population that the prospects for democracy were still viable. However, according to their own principle of democratization prospects, and given Russia’s external environment of low linkage, the country’s democratic transition was impossible (something that Levitsky and Way do not explicitly state) (see Bogaards and Elischer 2015, 11). In this line of inquiry, the Russian case of early regime decay resembles what Schedler (1998) considers an endogenous termination: when a democratically elected Yeltsin decided to end the democratic process by suspending the constitution in 1993, restricting media activities with the help of the oligarchs, and rigging the 1996 electoral results. This, in turn, points to the significance of elite agency (gatekeeper elites) (Tolstrup 2012) in shaping the endogenous environment for Russia’s regime transformation since the early 1990s. In particular, Russia’s domestic business elite, with ample political connections, played a major role in defining the relations with external actors (ibid., Bogaards and Elischer 2015, 11); which ominously reduced the influence of the latter on the country’s democratization process. Contrary to popular and hopeful claims concerning the process and outcome of Russia’s 1996 election, the said analysis points to the country’s missed “opportunity for democratization.”

**Deduction.** Weak institutionalization of Russia’s competitive authoritarianism between
1991 and 1996 served as a favourable ploy for Yeltsin’s administration to form ties with the business elite, thus increasing the sources of the state’s organizational power, while concurrently halting the country’s democratization process. This validates Hypothesis 2. But, within the aforementioned timeline, the only source of organizational power came from an increased centralization over the economy; there was still no cohesive ruling party, while state coercive power was merely manifested in the failed Chechen war. On the other hand, it became possible to observe an increase in another source of organizational power - party strength – coming from the oligarchs’ indirect support for Yeltsin’s campaign and his auxiliary parties. Thus, we cannot yet discuss Hypothesis 3, in which the means of autocratic reversion are dictated by the high organizational power; competitive authoritarianism in 1996 only began showing signs of decay.

Nonetheless, the persistence with which the oligarchs - with the benefit for the incumbent - carried out the privatization process of state assets, points to an increasing degree of authoritarianism. Although organizational power here remains low, increase in economic centralization and party capacity becomes apparent during the 1996 election, when, once again, the opposition decided not to act outside the regime. This was partly due to the decrease in the capacity of the legislative branch to influence any executive decision made by the incumbent to undermine democratic process. Accordingly, state’s cumulative organizational power in the context of a powerful presidency, in which the incumbent gained an unfair advantage in the 1996 election, increased the chances for authoritarian consolidation and reaffirmed the endogenous decay of competitive authoritarianism in Russia. According to this analysis, Hypothesis 4 holds.

In theoretical terms, in the face of a declining legitimacy, a democratically elected leader decided to subvert the electoral process by playing unfairly and resorting to autocratic means of dealing with the opposition (Schedler 1998; 2012; Mainwaring 2012).

**Background.** In 1997, Russia entered its third transitional stage, characterized by a sharp decline in ‘democracy’ and a steady backslide towards authoritarianism. In a matter of a few years following the 1996 presidential election, the incumbent government adopted a number of laws to hinder the development of opposition political parties (Lussier 2011, 292). Notably, the electoral threshold for entrance into the legislature was raised for the advantage of the existing power structure; political authority was recentralized; gubernatorial elections were cancelled; and new regulations that “severely curtailed freedom of the press and freedom of association” were introduced (ibid.).

In August 1998, a financial meltdown (ruble devaluation) along with world oil price appreciation jolted Russia’s political system like no other even since the October 1993 standoff (McFaul 2001, 354). In the immediate aftermath, the financial crisis changed the de facto distribution of power between political actors and institutions. After creeping close to constitutional breakdown, Yeltsin and the Duma collaborated to form a new government headed by his prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, who managed to diffuse the crisis (ibid.). However, in the spring of 1999, a new challenge to constitutional stability arose when the Duma, headed by the communists, began impeachment proceedings against the president (ibid., 355). Concurrently, Primakov, finding support in the Communist Party, decided to pose his candidacy for the presidential office in the next elections. During these times, the demand for stability was high and many looked for a strong figure to replace Yeltsin’s perceived vacillating, weak character (Lynch 2005; Way 2015). With Primakov having lost Yeltsin’s trust, the latter sought to replace his prime minister with a more loyal candidate. After serving as the Director of the Russia’s Federal Security
Service (FSB) since July 1998, Putin was appointed prime minister by Yeltsin in August 1999; with Yeltsin even publicly endorsing the former to become his successor. Formerly, Putin was not affiliated with any political party but later assured mutual support with Unity, which was created in September 1999 and was actively supported by Yeltsin. Primakov was then swiftly surpassed by Unity during the 1999 parliamentary election and quit presidential race in February 2000.

In this timeline, the previously emphasized notion of incumbent’s lack of preference for democracy, manifested in unfair electoral competition (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013), is not sufficient in explaining Russia’s regime trajectory. In addition, the notion of ‘leadership’ will be highlighted by the autocrat’s attempt to install and recover “authoritarian institutions such as parties and agencies of coercive and economic control” (Way 2015, 169). In the case of Russia, these will be primarily supported by institutional changes – revival of the nomenklatura system - that expedited the incorporation of the FSB in the governmental apparatus, hence reshuffling the means of economic control within the ruling coalition. The following analysis builds on the fact that fragments of the ruling coalition that formed in the early 1990s continued through the 1999 and 2000 elections, thus helping determine electoral outcomes.

**Analysis.** Competitive authoritarian rulers, as Schedler (2013, 377) suggests, “often strive to transform their precarious incumbency advantages into solid hegemonic domination.” To Schedler (2013, 377-8), Putin’s Russia is a prominent example of such competitive authoritarian regime - congealing system of domination, not yet solidified, but ‘muddling through’ towards a closed autocracy. In the same line of reasoning, both elements of state’s organizational capacity (strong party and centralization of economy) are inherently linked to its third feature - the coercive capacity – which is typically predicated on the military as well as the internal security forces. In Russia, the emphasis falls on the KGB’s successor - Federal Security Service (FSB), which rose
following the 1991 Soviet coup d’état that deposed Gorbachev and ordained democratically elected Yeltsin to be the President of Russia. The FSB began to progressively “penetrate the army, the media, and major societal organizations” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 188; 2006b) by presidential decree in the aftermath of the 1993 events. Given numerous episodes of regime instability in the early- to mid-1990s, especially in the absence of an ideology and a viable program to stabilize the economy, the incumbent government struggled to legitimize itself both politically and socially. This gradually led Yeltsin administration to deal with the opposition forces through less transparent means, often with the help of the FSB. Truly, since that time, “the primacy of the state has been legitimized with reference to real or (more often) imagined threats, both internal and external. Those threats had to be severe enough to justify the militarization of everyday life in Russia and the subjugation of the very foundations of society to militarist goals” (Shevtsova 2010, 154). In this regard, bequeathing the security service broad, intrusive powers will not only prove instrumental in the second invasion of Chechnya, but illustrate its key role in serving the next incumbent’s dealings with the domestic opposition forces.

One of the characteristics of competitive authoritarian regimes is that “…authoritarianism, even if it formally recognizes the decisive character of elections, is rarely associated with alteration in power by electoral means” (Golosov 2013, 632). “Even if constitutionally prohibited from staying in office, the autocrats tend to scrap tenure restrictions either straightforwardly, by changing the constitutional framework […], or covertly, by appointing hand-picked successors […]” (ibid., 632-3). In Russia, while the constitutional framework was famously changed in 1993, the 1999 reality was that the presidency was handed to Putin. Direct appointment of prime ministers by the Russian president has been a widespread practice since 1991; during his second and last term in office Yeltsin changed four prime ministers (Lynch 2005, 155-7). This practice,
in the case of the immediate post-1998 political crisis - when Yeltsin dismissed his prime minister of more than five years (Primakov) and installed a virtual unknown Sergei Kirienko instead – illustrates a formidable imbalance of power favouring the president (ibid., 155). However, transferring the presidency to Putin - a person unknown to the Russian public and a former KGB officer not yet known in Moscow - raises a theoretical issue.

Putin’s rise to presidency was a conscious decision made by Yeltsin which defied any presumed available alternatives at the time (Ostrow et al. 2007, 90). Instead of either completing his term or remaining in office whilst announcing early elections, or ensuring an honest campaign and vote to determine the next president (which would have left a lasting pro-democratic legacy), Yeltsin chose to hand the leadership of Russia to Putin – “a momentous decision that left a legacy of a final blow to democracy” (ibid.). Due to his declining health and attempting to protect the Family from “expropriation of their newly privatized wealth and criminal prosecution” (Lynch 2005, 155; Stewart et al. 2012), Yeltsin’s immediate network was in desperate need for a loyalist, who would ensure a smooth transition of executive power as well as security for the president’s intimate circle. On December 31st, 1999, Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned, thereby effectively handing the presidential power to Putin. Finally, the aforementioned political realities in Russia on the eve of the new millennium foreshadowed the immediate course of the country’s regime - there will be no more competitive elections, not to mention them being neither free nor fair.

**Incorporation of the FSB.** Russia’s authoritarian reversal (from competitive authoritarianism) can be explained by theories accentuating the mechanisms by which autocrats not only come to power but ensure their long tenures. As Gandhi and Przeworski (2007, 1280) point out, “the long tenure of some autocrats is attributed to their overwhelming monopoly of force.” After the KGB was officially dismantled by Yeltsin in 1991, the infrastructural capacities
and personnel of the organization remained intact. While the FSB’s predecessor had been subservient to the Communist Party and thus could be called a “state within a state,” the revamped FSB became in many ways the state itself; its officers were directly answering to the president, and its former members owned and controlled the commanding heights of the economy (Soldatov and Borogan 2010, 17-8). Following a series of operational failures in the first Chechen War, the FSB’s eminence and incorporation in the elite was resurrected when Yeltsin appointed Putin as its new director on July 25, 1998 (ibid.). Upon assuming powerful posts, Putin began to rebuild the intelligence services and to concentrate power in their hands (ibid., ix). Truly, during Putin’s first decade in power the FSB was immensely strengthened, expanding into new areas.

Even though Putin was relatively unknown to most people at that point, in part because he had never risen above the rank of lieutenant colonel in his sixteen-year career in the KGB, he achieved a swift rise in popularity. Some academics have argued that the hopes for a new energetic leader able to overcome the weakness and apathy of the power structures that blighted the state mechanism in the later years of Yeltsin’s presidency, were a major factor in boosting popular trust in Putin, leading to his eventual accession to presidency by the end of 1999 (see Lynch 2005; Way 2015). Yet, “These hopes were not supported by any concrete plans or promises: at the time he became prime minister, as well as later, President Putin did not offer any programme (nor even the outline of one)” (Levada 2000, 2-9). Then, how did he gain such high popularity so soon and how was he able to legitimize his power? Part of the explanation lies in Putin’s ability to exploit the national-patriotic sentiment in the wake of the second Chechen war, thereby primarily ascertaining his authority on charismatic grounds (Lynch 2005, 165). Besides, the lack of a strong democratic institutional base in Russia prior to the 1999 election gave Putin the advantage, as he did not face the resistance in his trajectory to power that he would have encountered otherwise. This was due
to the fact that Yeltsin did not build the democratic institutions (e.g. a party) representative of a strong state, opting to vest all the power in his own authority instead. The late 1990s experienced a different dynamic: as Yeltsin-style politics was waning, Putin profited greatly from certain external and national forces. Notably, dramatic increase in oil revenues since the 1998 crisis “allowed the state to meet pressing internal obligations such as wage and pension arrears as well as external ones such as foreign debt that consumes fully one-fourth of the Russian national budget, all the while prosecuting a costly war in Chechnya” (ibid.).

In terms of his institutional operation, Putin preserved the Soviet-type *nomenklatura* (Kryshtanovskaya 2008, 590) system, which awarded important positions to the agents with proved history of party adherence and loyalty (Svolik 2012, see Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009). This decision was not unusual given that authoritarian rulers often establish narrow institutions, such as consultative councils, juntas, and political bureaus, as a first institutional trench against threats from rivals within the ruling elite (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1280; see Brownlee 2007). In the case of Russia, as Anna Politkovskaya wrote a year before her murder, “Putin’s rule represented Neo-Sovietism with a new secret service nomenclature attempting to centralize power and to enrich them from the new hybrid capitalism” (Shinar 2015, 594; see Politkovskaya 2008, 139). In the same line of argument, Linz (2000; see Svolik 2012, 193) asserts that in authoritarian regimes there is constant process of co-optation (“the exchange of political support for the regime in return for material benefits”) of leaders. This process - beneficial for a dictatorship - serves as a “mechanism by which different sectors or institutions become participants in the system” (Linz 2000, 161). Additionally, Linz underlines the heterogeneity in the elite’s career patterns; its smaller number of professional politicians compared to those recruited from bureaucracy. Examples of the latter include technically skilled elites, the army as well as interest
groups (ibid.). Moreover, as per Svolik (2012), co-optation must be accompanied by repression because policies that establish state control over a wide range of careers – ranging from outright expropriation of key industries to heavy regulation – encounter opposition from society. It is highly unlikely that Putin’s success to deviate from a competitive authoritarian system and his swift rearrangement of the executive and legislative branches within the first couple of years of his presidential tenure would be possible had he not previously developed a dense network of trusted ‘friends’ from the secret security services, instrumental in dealing with opposition forces. His determination to preserve strategic aspects of the nomenklatura system was thus crucial to Russia’s reversion towards closed authoritarianism.

To reiterate the earlier claim, political recruitment in Russia is limited to elite co-optation, and in this way, the input function has a decisive influence on the total profile of the regime (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005, 2008). In such system, the president fills the highest state positions with selected people he personally knows and trusts (ibid.). This traditional and autocratic form of political recruitment, as Susan Stewart et al. (2012) propose, is the result of the exclusion of political parties from the political process. The presidential administration and the security apparatus thus replace their influence and dominate the selection of the highest civil service posts (ibid.). It has been emblematic of Russia’s regime that government posts were handed out in exchange for personal loyalty; and since the early 1990s, some posts could even be purchased (ibid.). Since then, assembling one’s own friends in arms has been a precondition to securing presidential power in Russia (see Lynch 2005; Zimmerman 2014). Whereas Yeltsin preferred to recruit his aides from different milieus and implicitly on clientelistic bases; Putin adhered a method of recruitment based on personal acquaintance and absolute loyalty from among his former colleagues at the KGB, the city administration of St. Petersburg and even from among
his personal friends (ibid., 75-6). Putin ensured his circle’s continual support by allowing them to participate in major economic endeavors. Following Putin’s presidential inauguration, many of his friends received high executive positions in key corporations (ibid.). These ‘corporate bureaucrats’ were mostly recruited from among the security apparatus – *siloviki*, as well as from the Interior Ministry policy, the military, and the regular police (see Ostrow et al. 2012, 103). This constellation was typical for the system of ‘patronal presidentialism’ - as defined by the American transitologist Henry Hale (Stewart et al. 2012, 76). Later, Putin raised them to dominate the entire government both in Moscow and St. Petersburg and extended them regionally; meanwhile, the president retained his right to exclusively control the entire apparatus (ibid.).

Another key tactic in Putin’s process of building power was his campaign’s strategic use of the media to frame a series of bombings around the country to justify the invasion of Chechnya. Within weeks of his taking over as Prime Minister in September 1999, several bomb blasts in apartment buildings in Moscow and other cities killed over 300 people (Ostrow et al. 2007, 89; see McFaul 2001, 18; Lynch 2005, 157; Rose et al., 2011, 43-4). The media offered no credible explanation regarding who was responsible for the explosions. Meanwhile, Putin blamed the Chechens, vowing to “rub them out in the outhouse” (ibid.), simultaneously stirring the nationalist sentiment of the Russian population. As a result, the panic surrounding the bombings and the launching of a second war against Chechnya gave way to Putin to acquire near-universal support; his ratings following these events rose several percentage points each week (ibid.). Unlike the first war, which took place during Yeltsin’s administration, the initial weeks of the new campaign appeared far more successful. Following the rapid siege of the capital of Chechnya (see McFaul 2001, 181), Putin boasted Russia’s military might, security, and economic growth (Way 2015, 148; Lynch 2005). In contrast to the 1994-6 Chechen war, public opinion in 1999 was formed in
government’s favour, as the war was framed so as to defend the interests of the Russian nation rather than the regime in power (Lynch 2005, 157).

Scheming the devastating events as hunting and punishing terrorists facilitated Putin’s legitimization in the eyes of the Russian population in the time leading up to the parliamentary elections on December 19, 1999, in which pro-Putin Unity Party came second with 23.3 percent of party-list votes (Levitsky and Way 2010, 196). In addition, Yeltsin’s decision wiped out hopes for a competitive presidential election on the eve of the new millennium, as it shortened the time to the election from six to just three months, thus placing insurmountable obstacles before candidates who were just beginning to organize (Ostrow et al., 2007, 91; McFaul 2001). These barriers in combination with Putin’s vast advantage of being an established incumbent and the status he created for himself as a ‘wartime president’, guaranteed his victory, winning with 53 percent in the only round of balloting (ibid., see Fish 2005, 34; Levitsky and Way 2010, 196). Manifestly, both elections were not characterized by the mere stealing of votes, but the effective “structuring of electoral choices through the use of the executive power of the government” (Lynch 2005, 158-9). In this regard, as Lynch (2005, 159) verifies, “the government – and government-controlled and government-friendly media (especially television) – orchestrated (as it did for Yeltsin in 1996) a pro-Putin blitz of positive coverage, while excoriating opponents with libelous charges and with little or no right to reply.”

Consequently, all opposition was effectively dissolved, either because they lacked time to raise funds or were ‘savaged’ by Boris Berezovsky’s media (ibid.; Shinar 2015). Others, such as leaders of several liberal groups comprising the SPS (Union of Right Forces), decided to capitulate and throw their support behind Putin and Unity in fear of political death after 1999 (ibid., 91-2). Berezovsky, who was closest to the Kremlin, had firmly directed his full support for Putin’s Unity
Party, which mostly comprised members of the military and the internal security police as well as FSB officials from his earlier surroundings (ibid., 92; Lynch 2005). While the oligarch Berezovsky devoted his control of ORT and his media machine against all the opponents, Gusinsky’s NTV casted their vote for Yavlinsky’s Yabloko, a decision which will backfire after Putin’s ascendance to power (ibid.). By 1999, as per Joel Ostrow et al. (2007, 9) in Russia, “dictatorship was the only game in town” (ibid.). In line with this paper’s argument, Russia was set on its way to rapid autocratization in the upcoming years.

**Deduction.** The way power transitioned between 1999-2000 - a year during which Putin assumed key positions in the Russian government – led to an increase in the sources of state’s organizational power: there was an indisputable increase in coercive capacity in the form of the FSB; Putin was building a cohesive party; all whilst he was backed by Yeltsin’s oligarchs during both legislative and presidential elections. Successive elections that retained Yeltsin’s rule and allowed him to appoint a personal loyalist prior to the end of his tenure reveal the discretionary fiscal and political control of the oligarchs, as they bestowed the incumbent with a capacity to eliminate the opposition and facilitate favourable conditions for the transfer of power in the oligarchic state. In turn, excessive constitutional power of the president helped the ruling elite form and increase organizational assets for the next incumbent. Thus, the aforesaid scrutiny shapes the background for discussing Hypothesis 5 in the next timeline, where the increasing organizational power in an oligarchic state leads to the conflict of power-sharing. In this timeline, however, concepts of authoritarian endurance showed how nominally democratic institutions helped Putin establish his authority, ascertain narrow institutions with high monopoly of force, as well as co-opt a group of financial and skilled elites. Undeniably, this was the time of an increased coercive and economic state power. The above-mentioned short-term endogenous political occurrences
signaled the upcoming regime closure which not only disproved the tenets of modernization theory once again, but highlighted the importance of delving into the organizations the leaders build for greater power concentration, in addition to their non-democratic inclinations (Way 2015, 169).

**Chapter 4. Russia’s Authoritarian Reversion: 2000-2004**

**Background.** As soon as inaugurated president in March 2000, Putin was determined to strengthen his presidential powers and restore the effectiveness of state power in all spheres. Within the first six months of his presidential tenure, Putin and his associates (*siloviki*) adopted policies to facilitate the re-establishment of central control over the state’s political and economic affairs. First of all, they began targeting regional governors, especially those controlling rich ‘donor’ regions, that had formed an association capable of advancing their interests in the Federation Council (Kryshtanovskaya 2008, 588). In May 2000, Putin established seven federal districts and personally appointed new representatives for each region to ensure the implementation of his constitutional powers. Secondly, Moscow oligarchs - who had virtually controlled the State Duma and had direct influence on the legislative decisions on foreign policy - embodied another dangerous enemy for Putin’s power consolidation (ibid., 592). In the absence of the rule of law, and state’s increased monopoly of force, Putin’s associates were able to draft fraudulent allegations against the oligarchs in order to imprison or exile them- if they were willing to relinquish their politically strategic assets and stay out of the new political game. Similarly, “the policy of taming the [independent] media was fairly well considered” (ibid., 589). While certain limited freedoms in the printed media (and radio) were allowed to exist, television was taken under tight control (ibid.). Finally, opposition political parties that raised criticism toward new authority were easily silenced, given the passive support of the population toward the Kremlin leadership (ibid.).
After Putin’s momentous ascendance to power, Russia faced a series of crises. In August 2000, there was the sinking of the atomic submarine Kursk; in the same month, there was an explosion in a Moscow underground passage; at the end of August, the Ostankino television and radio tower caught fire; in October 2002, there was the Moscow theatre hostage crisis; and finally, in September 2004, the Beslan school massacre took place. While the earlier series of crises occurred during Putin’s first year in office, the president had expressed the need to address the declining condition of technology and overall state of economy in the country. The last two crises - more devastating in their scale of violence – have raised vast criticism toward the FSB operators’ actions dictated by the government, thereby raising implicit, yet significant, concerns about the nature and composition of the new regime.

The analysis of this timeline is built around the framework of autocratic endurance, so as to properly explain the mechanisms of Putin’s authoritarian consolidation. Relatedly, installation of his “power vertical” will be examined to reveal the means by which Putin was able to promptly strengthen his party and eliminate the potential threats, thus leaving no chance for the opposition in the upcoming legislative and presidential elections. By the same token, the analysis will further uncover the mechanisms behind the increase of the ruling party strength, state coercive capacity, as well as recentralization of economy in the hands of the new ruling coalition that proved capable of reverting Russia’s regime from a competitive to closed autocracy.

**Analysis.** Putin’s coming to power and the mechanisms he employed to consolidate his ultimate authority can be primarily illustrated by theories of authoritarian resilience. The archetype of theories concerning authoritarian durability is that no dictator rules alone (Svolik 2012; Bueno De Mesquita and Smith 2011; Gandhi 2008) and ascendance to power requires enough resources to impede challenges by those who are excluded from power (Svolik 2012). In order to guarantee
enduring power, a dictator must build a coalition of supporters⁵ (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Bueno De Mesquita et al., 2011; Smith 2005); and the smaller the number of people a leader surrounds himself with, the easier it is for him to persist in office (Bueno De Mesquita and Smith 2011, 49-50, 72). Yet, “A prudent new leader [would] not count too much on those who helped him gain power … [and] will act swiftly to get some of them out of the way and bring in others whose interests more strongly assure their future loyalty” (Bueno De Mesquita 2011, 72). That is, in modern dictatorships, leaders come to power by wrestling away the influence of the individuals and institutions that originally brought them to power (Svolik 2012, 6). In Putin’s case, this primarily concerned the very oligarch who vastly invested and facilitated his success during both elections – Boris Berezovsky (see Lynch 2005; Kryshtanovskaya 2008; Shinar 2015).

Therefore, as Diamond (2002, 23) suggests, “tracking the interplay between changes in political competition and changes in political repression may help understand when and how moments of possible transition open and close in electoral authoritarian regimes.” For instance, instead of securing political power through stuffing the ballot box, there occurs deployment of unnecessary levels of violence and intimidation (Svolik 2009). Accordingly, it is important to outline the tactics utilized by Putin for a more extensive reach of presidential power immediately upon assuming presidency: staffing of the presidential administration with allies and clients from security services, and crucially, his implementation of “power vertical.” Most comparativists agree that with Putin’s coming to power in 2000, Russia began its course of authoritarian consolidation. However, not many stress the process of autocratic reversion in this case. Reversion implies a country which attempted to democratize –whether successfully or not – exhibits the autocratic practices of the regime from whence it came. These practices are normally attributed to elites

⁵ A ruling coalition in an autocracy refers to a “set of individuals who support a dictator and, jointly with him, hold enough power to guarantee the regime’s survival” (Svolik 2012, 7).
controlling the process. A number of scholars observed how in the post-communist period, “Russia’s political leaders made choices that undermined rather than promoted the creation of a democratic political system” (Ostrow et al., 2007, 101). Furthermore, Baturo and Elkink (2016, 78) identify the pattern of an authoritarian reversion emphasizing the importance of Putin’s personal patron-client network that he has strengthened over time. To support this claim, Svolik (2009) reaffirms the dynamic of the transition from a contested autocracy to an established dictatorship; which he perceives as the transition from oligarchy to autocracy.

In this regard, Svolik (2009, 482-3) argues that “instead of allies, who share power with the dictator and may constrain his choices, the members of the ruling coalition become administrators or personnel, who are fully subservient to the dictator and do not share power with him in any meaningful way.” Comparably, White and Kryshtanovskaya (2005, 296) observe the enormous political influence of the major owners in a state formation of an oligarchic state, particularly during the time of a new redistribution of property between 1998 and 2000 following the August 1998 crisis. In an oligarchic state, as the authors content, “the distance between state power and big business is minimal: it is a narrow circle in which everyone knows everyone” (ibid.). Chaim Shinar (2015, 590) notes that during Putin’s first term as president, from 2000 to 2003, “he balanced elegantly between his own rising circle of former KGB men from St. Petersburg, the siloviki, and the declining oligarchs.” Thus, “Putin’s men did not break the link between wealth and power created by Yeltsin and the oligarchs, rather, they took it over” (ibid.). In this regard, White (2008) draws attention to the overriding role of the FSB’s key officials at the time - Nikolai Patrushev, Viktor Ivanov and Igor Sechin - in the domestic policy-making. Sechin became the chairman of a state-owned oil company, Rosneft, through the seizure of Yukos’s (the largest oil company at that time) assets following the proceedings against its chairman and first-wave
oligarch, Khodorkovsky (see Kryshtanovskaya 2008, 587; Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009; Shinar 2015, 590). However, in contrast to Yeltsin-time oligarchs, the new ones – mostly comprised of siloviki and Putin’s personal friends - were gradually stripped of direct access to politics. By his second presidential term, as Kryshtanovskaya and White (2009, 289) find, the richest owners were not only required “to keep out of politics, [but] also had to refrain from public activity of any kind, unless it was on the Kremlin’s direct instructions.”

**Putin’s “Power Vertical”**. As mentioned earlier, Putin’s immediate aim was restoration of an effective state power and subjugation of “all forms of Russian ‘civil society’, democratic or elite” (Lynch 2005, 160). The term “power vertical” stands for the hierarchical power arrangement that Putin adopted shortly after his inauguration. Some critics deem the term as “an unprecedented strengthening and consolidation of Moscow’s power and the weakening of Russia’s regions” (Shiraev 2013, 107; see Mendras 2012, 162-6; see Lynch 2005, 160-2). Within this context, Svolik (2012, 193) identifies three features of authoritarian parties: hierarchical assignment of service and benefits, political control over appointments, and selective recruitment and repression (ibid.). These features, in turn, enable two distinct political functions: direct political control and party-based co-optation (ibid.). The former refers to “the immediate outcomes of party members’ service, [as] it ranges from intelligence gathering, maintenance of social stability, and monitoring of political discipline in single-party regimes to electoral mobilization, intimidation, fraud and campaigning in dictatorships with dominant and hegemonic parties” (ibid.). It is thus descriptive of the functions that Putin’s party performed at the beginning of his tenure. Furthermore, Svolik explains how such hierarchical assignment of services along with the authoritarian party’s activities directly contribute to survival of dictatorships. All three features and their auxiliary activities of authoritarian parties were manifested in Putin’s dealings with the legislative branch.
and regional powers. Putin’s “power vertical” helped weaken regional powers by selectively assigning new governors from his own former KGB circle; while those who refused to play by the new rules or undermined his authority, were forced to resign (Shiraev 2013, 107). Secondly, these features take advantage of natural career aspirations to create an enduring stake in the regime’s survival among the most productive and ideologically agreeable segments of the population (ibid.; see Zimmernam 2014; Stewart et al., 2012).

The rapid increase of the state’s organizational power under Putin may be primarily assigned to his immediate determination to assert the dominance of his party, which would essentially alleviate the power-sharing problem. Kryshtanovskaya and White (2005, 247) claim that “Putin was bent on bringing to heel those groups whose resources were such as to be able to resist him and his policies, to encourage the development of a strong single party (United Russia), to utilize a virtual press monopoly to mobilize electoral support, and to ensure electoral preeminence largely by inflating electoral turnout cum run-of-the-mill fraud.” This meant that the centers of power that had begun to compete with the new executive for resources - along with their political influence - had to be eliminated. Thus, the governors from the rich donor regions, the Duma, oligarchs, the independent media, opposition parties and public organizations that were not controlled by the Kremlin were direct dangers to the new regime, and Putin dealt with them one by one (ibid., see Kryshtanovskaya and White 2008).

From a Russia-wide perspective, the decisive factor in Putin’s strengthening his grip on power was the emasculation of regional governors as a national force, the influence of which had been considerable in the 1999 legislative and 2000 presidential elections (Zimmerman 2014, 250; Stewart et al. 2012, 76). In fact, within days of Putin’s inauguration, moves against governors’ independence and their influence both on their respective home grounds and on the national
political scene had begun (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009). The establishment of the seven intermediate federal districts and alteration of the composition of the Federal Council (ibid.), in which governors lost their automatic representation, allowed Putin to drastically revert Russia’s course towards a harsher form of authoritarianism. Indeed, the State Council became an important element of “Putin-style Federalism,” as *siloviki* had already infiltrated the regional legislatures and dominated the United Russia organization, which Putin formed to win the Duma elections in December 1999 (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009, 286). 75 percent of these *apparaty* of the presidential envoys, as Kryshtanovskaya and White point out, were comprised of people from the security services (ibid., 286-7).

Likewise, the Duma lost its ability to impede the plans of the president (Zimmerman 2014, 250). While Yeltsin faced problems with the Duma during his presidency, Putin succeeded in establishing a tight control right from the start of his tenure in office (ibid.). This success persisted through the period up to and including Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency, when Putin preserved his influence through his prime ministership. One element at the inception of his presidential tenure, William Zimmerman posits, was a very skillful deal-making involving the party of power – Unity – and the other parties in the Duma, including a formerly extraordinary coalition between Unity and the KPRF, which cut the other parties out of the leadership positions in the Duma (ibid.). Hence, in the period prior to the December 2003 legislative election, the Kremlin was highly successful in crafting coalitions to address specific issues involving United Russia and other parties in the Duma (ibid.). Moreover, the Beslan hostage-taking crisis of September 2004 allowed Putin to re-establish control over elections and party legislation by pushing through key amendments;

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6 The term refers to “a system where everybody can talk, but the president takes decisions. If the political need arises, the new advisory body can be dismissed with the same facility as it was created – by presidential decree” (Zakharov and Kapishin 2000, 10-15; see Lynch 2005).
which have strengthened the center’s control over the regions and dealt a serious blow to the development of democracy (Gelman and Ross 2010, 172-3; see Kryshtanovskaya and White 2009, 285). Also, this crisis demonstrated the pervasiveness of the FSB forces, which, under Putin’s direct control, helped solidify his personal grip on power and strengthened his party.

It has been a widespread perception that autocracies “cannot afford constitutionally indecisive elections. But if elections are formally decisive, then the rational strategy for the autocrat is to seek not only a majority for the ruling party, thus achieving control over the legislature, but also to invest efforts into gaining supermajorities, thus bolstering its own legitimacy and preventing the opposition from mounting a challenge” (Golosov 2013, 629). Zimmerman (2014, 250) asserts that “by the December 2003 Duma election, the need for coalition building involving United Russia and other parties (but not within United Russia) had been reduced substantially as national-level politicians benefited from Putin’s enormous popularity.”

As discussed in the previous timeline, this was a period of an ever-increasing state (coercive) capacity and party cohesion that was mainly attained through the effective use of media since the coverage of the second Chechen War. Hence, employing similar tactics from the 1999 election, Putin’s United Russia (successor of Unity) was able to gain a two-thirds supermajority – 223 of 450 Duma seats (Lynch 2005, 159; Levitsky and Way 2010, 198).

Zimmerman (2014, 250) finds that because most politicians sought to ‘ride into office on his coattails’, the elections resulted in Putin’s party gaining slightly more than 300 of the 450 total parliamentary seats. This was due to a key institutional innovation, which “increas[ed] the minimum number of members of the Duma required to form a so-called deputy ‘group’ from thirty-five to fifty-five, further alter[ing] the incentives for individuals to join United Russia, as did the proliferation of deputy chairs of the Duma” (ibid.). This institutional invention was
representative of what Thomas Remington terms the “political logic of an authoritarian dominant party system” (ibid.). In such system, as Zimmerman indicates, the leader has two alternative paths to ensuring the compliance of his followers: repression and revenue sharing (ibid.). These served as mechanisms for solving the power-sharing problem for the new autocrat. Meanwhile, since Putin’s coming to power, elections seemed to cease to represent the main arena of competition.

Like this, Putin succeeded in rapidly consolidating authoritarian rule through the elimination of his key sources of vulnerability (Levitsky and Way 2010, 200). He encountered enormous risks when dealing with the dangers to his regime immediately after assuming power (Kryshtanovskaya 2008, 587-9). Again, the incumbent faced no resistance from either regional governors, oppositions parties, oligarchs or the independent media (ibid.). In this timeline, however, in the context of low leverage and a weak opposition, Putin faced no opposition because he had managed to eliminate ‘the last vestiges of democracy’ (ibid.). Indeed, “The post-2003 period saw the ‘destruction without exception of all opposition parties’ and elimination of ‘meaningful alternatives to incumbent power.’ As the 2004 presidential election approached, several major candidates, including Zyuganov, opted not to run. Facing only minor opposition, Putin was overwhelmingly reelected with 71 percent of the vote in the first round” (ibid., 198-9). Therefore, in line with Levitsky and Way’s (2002, 55) earlier allegation, Russia’s regime could then be considered as closed authoritarianism, as “regimes in which presidents are reelected with more than 70% of the vote can generally be considered noncompetitive.”

Correspondingly, regarding the 1999 legislative and the 2000 presidential elections, Karen Dawisha (2014, 224) notes that “the fraud and abuse that were features of both [elections] were a clear signal to rival politicians that those who provided early support would be rewarded and those who thought that elites could be ousted by democratic elections were both foolhardy and doomed.”
The most influential television channel (NTV), owned by Gusinsky, at the time stood in the way of Putin’s campaign. Almost immediately following Putin’s inauguration, the oligarch was arrested and jailed on “embezzlement charges,” and shortly after, “forced to relinquish control of his media holdings and left the country for exile to Spain (Shinar 2015, 588-92; Kryshtanovskaya 2008). Khodorkovsky, who was then funding the opposition parties – SPS and Yabloko, was forced to sell Yukos and by 2003, he got arrested and charged with fraud. Berezovsky, among many others was forced into exile. In sum, these economically powerful - and thus politically influential - oligarchs represented a direct threat to Putin’s building of a strong cohesive party, necessary for securing his grip on power. By ceasing strategically powerful resources from the Moscow oligarchs, Putin was able to significantly increase another source of organizational power: he recentralized the economy in the hands of his strong party. The traditional feature of the Russian politics aiming at the concentration of the economy and coercive apparatus in the hands of the executive was thus preserved and facilitated regime closure in 2004.

**Deduction.** Russia’s primary stage of autocratic reversion occurred between 2000 and 2004. Theories of authoritarian endurance, specifically concerning the dynamics of a dictator’s coalition building through imposition of a hierarchy of power, served as a reasonable framework for identifying the mechanisms by which Putin encouraged regime’s transition from competitive to closed autocracy. Based on the previous analysis, it could be argued that while the 1999 and 2000 elections were extremely unfair, the 2003 legislative and 2004 presidential elections were neither fair nor free, as illustrated by the incumbent’s repression toward both the opposition as well as the old and new oligarchs (the former being ousted and the latter being restricted from any political activity outside of Putin’s instructions). The competitive component of these elections was undermined by Putin’s policies against the regional governors; appropriation of the media;
purging of the oligarchs controlling key resources; and undermining political parties.

In the attempt to secure his power, Putin needed to increase the state’s organizational power (coercive, economic, and party capacity). As described in the previous timeline, coercive strength was achieved by incorporating the FSB in the highest branches of the Russian government. Thereafter, Putin had to address the political (strong party) and economic aspects. In order to strengthen his party, he had to minimize or eliminate the political influences outside of his immediate control. In Russia’s oligarchic state of the late 1990s, oligarchs - in possession of media and other key resources – were the most influential political actors and as such, posed a direct threat to Putin’s strengthening of United Russia. In line with theories of autocratic endurance, the remaining step for Putin’s successful power establishment was to appropriate the country’s strategic resources owned by the old business elite. This exemplifies how the increase in organizational power led to the conflict of power-sharing between Putin and the oligarchs (and regional governors), thus proving Hypothesis 5.

By establishing seven federal districts and appointing siloviki as regional governors, Putin stripped regional authority of any influence over the central political and economic control, as well as ensured loyalty of this legislature for the upcoming elections. Likewise, the capacity to pressure the oligarchs controlling the media in 1999, and later, seizure of national television channels, allowed Putin to frame the events surrounding the second invasion of Chechnya and Beslan hostage crisis in a manner that legitimized new series of centralizing measures, thereby solidifying his control over the elections. Elimination of the oligarchs who helped Putin come to power and transferring their control over the country’s wealth into the hands of his party loyalists from former KGB, clearly solidified United Russia’s grip over the economy (as well as the media), hence starving the opposition. Thus, in addition to its direct control over coercive forces, the ruling party
was strengthened due to Putin’s strategic coalition formation and swift re-centralization of the economy under the new governing elite. This points to the endogenous process of attaining high organizational power, which, in turn, dictated the means of autocratic reversion following Putin’s ascendance to power. This supports Hypothesis 3. By the same token, high organizational power allowed Putin to alleviate the power-sharing problem through rigorous rearrangement of the executive and legislative branches and consolidate the type of authoritarianism, where elections stopped epitomizing the essential arena of contestation. Hypothesis 6 thus also holds.

The future of Russia’s regime. Levitsky and Way as well as Lynch accentuate the instability of Putin’s regime. For the former, this vulnerability stems from the absence of nonmaterial and critical bases of cohesion, such as ideology or past history of conflict (Levitsky and Way 2010, 200-1). In particular, despite the fact that Putin’s United Russia has been widely accepted as a strong and ‘true dominant party’ – especially when it comes to its size and resources - such ‘pure patronage-based machines’ are perceived to be vulnerable to defection during the time of crisis (ibid., 201). Levitsky and Way argue that even though Putin did not face crisis in early 2000s, United Russia remains vulnerable in the future because it heavily relies on patronage (ibid.). On the other hand, Lynch finds that the earlier-mentioned series of crises in the early 2000s revealed the strength of the Kremlin. The author contends that Putin’s reactions to these crises “suggest that Soviet-era instincts of secrecy, deniability, and servility remain strong among Russian officialdom, above all in the ranks of the military and paramilitary personnel that make up a major part of [his] system of governance” (Lynch 2005, 164). Thus, for Lynch, it is the absence of a mechanism that could facilitate self-generating economic recovery which makes Russia particularly susceptible to ‘externally determined conjunctural factors’ (Lynch 2005, 164). The collapse of oil prices condemned Gorbachev in the mid 1980s and Yeltsin in the late 1990s;
while Putin profited immensely from the stabilization of the Russian economy following the 1998 August crash (ibid.). Yet, “Putin’s ability to maneuver among the ‘oligarchs’ … depends on a steady stream of oil and gas revenues into state coffers” (ibid.). This means that the problem of power-sharing between the finance chiefs and the government in Russia is significantly influenced by the world oil prices, which, when in decline, may place the state in a vulnerable position (ibid.).

According to their reasoning, even in the presence of a strong party, the lack of ideology and the system’s overall dependence on patronage networks comprised of oligarchs appear to limit one of the sources of organizational power. However, while it is true that Putin’s United Russia lacked official ideology, there had emerged a powerful ideological element that would gradually turn into the dominant state ideology – Russian nationalism (Kryshtanovskaya 2008), the rise of which could be attributed to Putin’s 1999 war rhetoric surrounding the reasons behind the second invasion of Chechnya. Moreover, even though Lynch mentions the enduring presence of the Soviet-era KGB and military mentality among the Russian ruling elite at the time of the early 2000s’ crises, it would not be so far-stretched as to suggest that those very qualities inherited by the FSB make Putin’s system of governance significantly more resilient to external pressures.

Regime’s susceptibility to the externally dictated economic factors could certainly affect the dynamic between the elites engaged in power-sharing. However, recall that shortly after his presidential inauguration, Putin imposed “tighter limits on the business elite and restricted its freedom of activity, which has led to a reduction in its direct influence on the political process” (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005, 306). By the same token, Putin’s oligarchs have been largely excluded from the executive decision-making, and as Shinar (2015, 590) put it, “[they] bowed to power but were then allowed to share their wealth with power.” The author finds that “Russia’s wealthy siloviki and oligarchs, their nationalism notwithstanding, have preferred to invest in real
estate on the Riviera and in London or simply deploy their cash to Cyprus or the Cayman Islands” (ibid., 590-1) - investments that are of little to no political significance to Russia. All this means that the management of the domestic patronage network in Russia epitomizes a stronghold of the incumbent’s vast power that would be difficult to disrupt even if global oil prices were to drop.

Also, it would be a mistake to underestimate the strong coercive capacity of United Russia, which is evocative of Putin’s close circle of friends and trustees (with security service background) and those personally appointed by the president to head the FSB and the national military. Thus, to whichever degree the external forces may influence one source of organizational power, coercive state capacity (especially when subjugated to a strong ruling party), remains of ultimate importance, as it is capable of suppressing both elite- and opposition-driven forces. Besides, neither elite defection in the context of heavy reliance on patronage networks, nor drastic power-sharing problem as a result of world oil price collapse have occurred in Russia in the first decade of the new millennium.

My earlier analysis exposed the correlation between the centralized economic control and autocratic durability by assessing the endogenous nature of elite-level politics. However, the above does not entirely ignore the impact that a global oil price collapse could have on the Russian politics. The extent to which the Russian state controls financial flows in the sphere of oil and gas suggests the need to investigate the impact of natural resources on authoritarian reversal. In this respect, the literature on the “resource curse” (Ross 2001; 2012; Fish 2005) may help explain the impact of natural resources on authoritarian stability in an oil-based regime during economic crisis (see Way 2015), while concurrently assessing the dynamics within the ruling coalition upholding centralized economic control.
Conclusion

An immense body of literature on democratization and democratic breakdown have explained the means of regime change of post-third wave countries via modernization/structural or actor-based approaches. However, in the past couple of decades, a number of hybrid regimes have come to constitute anomaly cases of autocratic reversions despite their medium- to high-level incomes. This is as far as modernization theory can advance to explain the understudied phenomenon of autocratic reversion in post-Cold War countries. Actor-based approach dominating a vast body of literature on democratization, democratic breakdown, and more recently, autocratic endurance, have positively influenced modern studies on regime transformations that have operationalized and placed variants of hybrid regimes at the center of their justifications for various regime outcomes. As such, differences between the variants of new types of authoritarianisms have been useful in detecting the obscurities of electoral competition between an incumbent and the opposition. In addition, newfangled concepts such as (weak) degree of institutionalization, strong presidential powers, state’s organizational power have been emphasized to explain democratic declines in non-consolidated democracies. Yet, there are still not enough studies conducted to firmly outline the common mechanisms of autocratic reversion from hybrid regimes.

This paper presented a case study in which special attention was drawn to the three sources of organizational power that were able to command the degree of capacity of a strong leader to suppress democratic opposition, install authoritarian institutions, and thus reverse regime’s course from competitive to closed authoritarianism. Prior to that event, the causes and mechanisms – weak institutionalization, superpresidential constitution, increasing organizational power – enabling the successive consolidation and decay of competitive authoritarianism were explained. The trajectory of Russia’s autocratic reversion becomes clearer as various timelines reveal political dynamics
attributable to the country’s authoritarian evolution.

Since the beginning of the country’s transition in the early 1990s, elections in Russia were tainted by unfair competition while weak regime institutionalization allowed Yeltsin to deploy undemocratic tactics in order to remain in power. These tactics were made possible due to the clientelistic nature of Yeltsin’s relationship with the oligarchs funding various political parties endorsing the incumbent. Most notably, the constitutional crisis of 1993, which ended in the bombardment of the parliament, dissolution of a legislative body, and installation of a superpresidential constitution represented the regime’s competitive authoritarian nature. These events support Hypotheses 1 and 2, as weak regime institutionalization in middle-income Russia not only facilitated Yeltsin’s oppressive behavior, but led to an increase of state’s control over the economy by allowing large-scale privatization of Russia’s industrial, financial, and energy sectors by a small group of business oligarchs.

In the aftermath of the 1993 standoff, Yeltsin was able to dictate the new institutional order and new rules of the game, with which the opposition decided to comply. Since then, elections were established as sole legitimate means of attaining political power (McFaul 2001, 349). However, following the defeat in the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections, in conjunction with declining popular support for the regime as a result of a devastating war in Chechnya in 1994, Yeltsin resorted to extraordinary means of preserving his power through the flawed 1996 presidential election. At that time, Yeltsin still lacked a party and did not possess coercive capacity, but by means of large financial investments in Yeltsin’s campaign by the business oligarchs, he was able to win the election. However, as his legitimacy was weakened again following the 1996 election, strong presidential powers along with the beginning of an increase in two sources of organizational power – both dictated by oligarchs - denoted the imminent termination of
competitive authoritarianism. Also, as Russia’s world economic and strategic importance kept impeding Western linkage, whilst organizational power was on the rise, the decline of competitive authoritarianism epitomized an endogenous process, thereby supporting Hypothesis 4. Thus, in Russia, the level of authoritarianism rose parallel to the state’s increasing organizational power.

In the next couple of years leading up to Putin’s rise to powerful governmental positions, the financial crisis of 1998 shook the Russian economy and severely affected the balance of power between the weak incumbent, the opposition, and the oligarchs. The electoral undercurrents surrounding the 1999 legislative and the 2000 presidential elections point to Russia’s rapid authoritarian reversal shortly after Yeltsin handed Putin the power. The latter’s nationalist rhetoric in the wake of the second Chechen war, with support of effective media coverage, led to a widespread support and an easy win during the 2000 elections. Coercive state capacity and strong party did not emerge as significant sources of organizational power until Putin was inaugurated president. Yet, the country’s authoritarian U-turn commenced in 1999, when Putin managed to occupy three key positions within only one year, thus changing the political landscape of Russia and securing its autocratic resilience. Here, key concepts of authoritarian endurance – power-sharing, coalition-formation, repression – served as a viable framework for explaining the evolution of organizational power.

The conflictual dynamics between the newly established incumbent and the old elite illustrated how the power-sharing problem resulted from a rising organizational power in the Russian oligarchic state, thus proving Hypothesis 5. Subsequently, it became possible to pinpoint the mechanisms of autocratic reversion in Russia between 2000 and 2004. Russia’s then high organizational power - coming from a strong party, coercive capacity, and economic recentralization - was profoundly embedded in the patronage system that Putin had rapidly
established during his first term as president. He established a strong party comprised of former KGB officers and his personal loyalists, who were then granted ownerships and/or enormous shares in Russia’s economic wealth. Thus, the way in which a former KGB agent managed to form and consolidate a strong support network, mainly comprising agents from the coercive apparatus; recentralize economic control; as well as suppress regional elites, Moscow oligarchs, and independent media - depict a steep autocratic reversion following Putin’s ascendance to power. Most importantly, such a dense model of power organization controlled by the incumbent, backed by a superpresidential constitution, proved fatal to the remnants of competitive authoritarianism; mainly by skewing the playing field to the point of invalidating the only legitimate means (elections) of obtaining any sort of political power for the opposition in Russia. These events validated Hypotheses 3 and 6, as despite optimistic tendencies of scholars classifying Russia’s regime as stable competitive authoritarian, authoritarianism in Russia was closed by 2004.

This study could be complemented by another single case study for comparison or incorporated in a larger N-analysis. The causal mechanisms of authoritarian reversion and favorable political conditions to such endeavor, could be further investigated in present-day Turkey, Poland, and Hungary, as current political trends in these countries have already exhibited their potential vulnerability to enter processes of autocratization.
References


